

Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

Vol. 63 No. 2 2019



About the covers

This issue of *Bandwagon* is devoted to the Hartford big top fire as we observe the 75th anniversary of that horrible event. On the front cover is a photograph of the Wallendas taken the day after the fire at the steps to their dressing room wagon. Although it perhaps gives a sense that these performers knew they were in front of the camera, it nevertheless reflects a somber tone that was representative of the circus contingent that was there when the big top burned to the ground. Clockwise from the lower left are Karl Wallenda, his brother Herman, Karl's wife Helen, and Joseph Geiger. Looking on is Karl and Helen's young daughter, Carla.

Across the country, banner headlines reported the news of the tragedy. The morning after the fire, *The Hartford Courant* provided details to the local community that had suffered so greatly. Of course, the death toll and number of injuries cited were preliminary. Note the second line of the July 7 front page reproduced on the back cover. It related that five circus officials had been arrested and charged in connection with the fire.

The Great Wallendas debuted before the American public on April 5, 1928 in New York's Madison Square Garden. From that first performance with *The Greatest Show on Earth*, they were a hit. The members of the sensational troupe at that time were the same four German artists who performed on the Big One in 1944 – Karl, Herman, Helen and Joe (Helen's sister Henrietta was also in the act in 1944). This ensemble, along with others invited to join the act in subsequent years, completed 16 seasons with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey (1928-1946).

The Wallendas branched out in 1947, taking to the road with the Wallenda Family Circus. During that spring, they first presented their seven-person pyramid on the high wire. For the next 15 years, Karl Wallenda trouped with a variety of shows. Helen retired in 1959. Carla Wallenda developed her own act, starring with some of the country's largest shows.

Tragedy seemed to follow the Great Wallendas. Several members of the family died in falls from the high-wire and other aerial acts. "The Seven" collapsed in Detroit in 1962 during a performance at the Detroit Shrine Circus. Dieter Schepp and Richard Faughnan died as a result of the fall, and Mario Wallenda was critically injured. Yetty Wallenda fell from her sway pole in 1963 and was killed. Yet like the Ringling circus after the Hartford fire, Karl and his troupe persevered. They continued to offer thrills on the high-wire for many years.

Late in his career, "skywalks" became Karl's new trademark. In 1978, during an attempted walk between two hotels in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the end came. At age 73, Wallenda fell to his death. Karl had introduced startling new displays decade after decade, earning him a rightful claim to having been one of the great circus stars of all time.

Michael R. Skidgell provided the cover image of the Wallendas. An original print of this photograph is at the Connecticut State Library.

The front page of *The Hartford Courant* on the back cover was made available by Circus World Museum's Library & Research Center.

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Mission Statement

"To preserve, promote, and share through education the history and cultural significance of the circus and allied arts, past and present."

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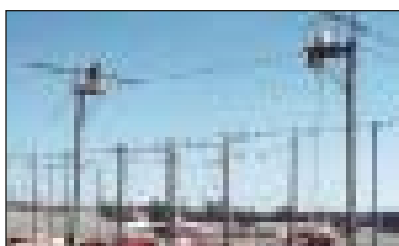


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From the Editor

This July 8 will mark exactly 75 years to the day since a 20-year-old resident of Decatur, Illinois wrote a letter to the editor complaining about commentary that had appeared in the newspaper earlier that morning. That person was Bob Parkinson, a young circus enthusiast who would one day establish the Library at Circus World Museum. The paper printed his letter the following day, giving it the heading, "Circus Will Live On." Bob's letter began:

"Sir: In Saturday's *Herald*, there was an editorial which sounded like the last rites of that great American institution, The Circus. It was written in connection with the Hartford circus fire, and entitled, 'End of an Institution?' The title fits well with the mournful tone of the text. I would think that your writers would tire of holding periodic circus funerals..."

Bob went on to cite an instance in 1938 when his hometown paper published an editorial about the dreadful circus season when so many shows closed early. He noted that viewpoint had referred to "...the 'inevitable trend' and 'bitter reality' of the 'dying circus.'"

Next Parkinson observed that the 1942 Cleveland menagerie fire had "...called forth another editorial...which

spoke of the 'end of the trail' and 'the passing of the circus'..."

Bob – who some readers may know was my dad – concluded his letter with this:

"For over 60 years, the Ringling and Barnum circuses, separately till 1919, combined afterwards, have toured America, and the Circus in general, is as old as our Republic. Ten minutes of accidental disaster cannot erase the happy reputation built up over those decades... If the Circus ever does die, make a long sermon in your columns, but please, don't unnecessarily break the hearts of those who love the Circus, with repeated false alarms."

The most treasured gift Dad conveyed to me during my childhood was a love for the circus. For me, every circus day was an around-the-clock adventure, and I was awestruck by the unbelievable magic of the nomadic big top. Christmas morning and my birthday paled in comparison. Yet, I distinctly remember at a circus fans gathering – I was about 11 or 12 – becoming disturbed with scrapbook images I saw of the aftermath of the Hartford fire and especially the photo of Little Miss 1565. How could something so terrible be associated with a spectacle that I cherished beyond imagination?

In this issue of *Bandwagon*, we look closely at the Hartford fire and how it fits into the story of the American

circus. Fred Dahlinger chronicles circus tent losses due to fires and all kinds of weather-related disasters, and he sets the record straight on how the "Disaster March" came to be. The quoted words of Ringling performers and staff who were present, tell of the moments of the fire as no one else could. Michael Skidgell places readers "inside" the circus fire that took the lives of 168 people, and his story provides us with facts and circumstances to compare with those set forth in Warren Kimball's report published just days after the blaze. Photographs of selected artifacts relate even more about the fateful two-day stand in Hartford. Lastly, Chris Berry gives us a highly readable account of the recovery of



As in past years, dazzling circus posters let residents know that The Greatest Show on Earth was coming to the capital of Connecticut.

Chris Berry Collection



Unanswered questions remain concerning the cause of the July 6, 1944 circus big top fire. Although testing apparently has ruled out an inadvertent tossed cigarette, did the fire start with another accidental action? Or as some believe, did an arsonist set the blaze?

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the show and the so-called “Blue Heaven” tour.

As Bob Parkinson prophesized, the “happy reputation” of the Circus has lived on. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey came back after the 1944 inferno, and it and many other shows flourished in the decades thereafter. Nevertheless, for so many residents of the Hartford community and elsewhere, the fire still looms in the darkness.

There must never be a joyful “celebration” associated with the remembrance of the Hartford circus fire. However, the 75th anniversary of that horrible day does provide an opportunity to revisit the record and set the tragic event in its appropriate place in circus history. It can also serve as a reminder that the circus is a resilient phoenix, and that it lives by the motto, “The show must go on.”

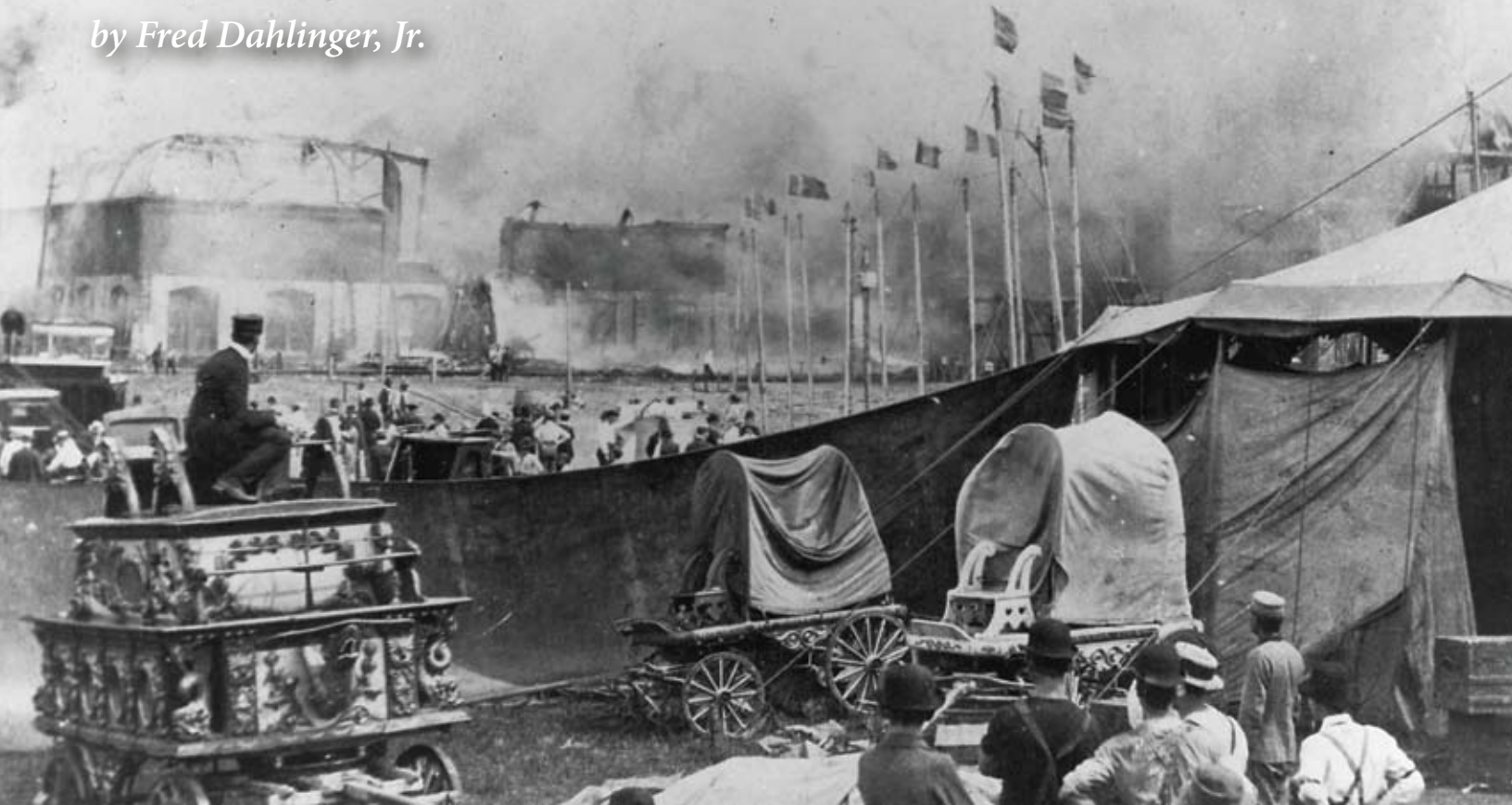


Kitty Clark portrayed the mermaid atop a Panto's Paradise float during an outdoor performance of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey at Soldier Field. The Chicago engagement occurred in late August of 1944 during the show's post-fire tour.

Tegge Circus Archives

Circus Tent Losses and the “Disaster March”

by Fred Dahlinger, Jr.



Circus people were constantly on the lookout for any threat to the canvas tops, as in this instance at Kansas City on August 5, 1901 when a nearby building fire wafted glowing embers into the air.

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Foreword

No study has been published that places the Hartford circus fire into a context of American circus history. The passage of 75 years and the ability to more readily search for accounts of fires now makes this a feasible task. This paper is not an attempt to provide any excuses for that day and the tragedy that transpired for the 168 who lost their lives; and the scores or those that were injured; and thousands that suffered the emotional effects and losses of loved ones for years thereafter. The investigations that followed the tragedy address the reality of the circus response. Yet, in contrast to those findings stand the preparedness, determined actions and dedicated commitment by circus personnel to limiting fires to less than two dozen known incidents before the 1944 fire. As

will be seen, there was no loss of life due to an American circus tent fire until that fateful day. In an era of great human and asset loss to flames, they were relatively safe venues for large audiences and as a result continued in use providing shelter against the sun's rays and rains. Thunderstorms, tornadoes and lightning strikes alone, naturally occurring events, did take lives at the circus, and numerous times. However, even when they caused a tent fire, there was no loss of life. Smoking by patrons, in spite of show vigilance and warnings to cease the activity, remained a challenge throughout field show existence, as did other everyday presence of fire – a passing locomotive and adjacent structure fires. Fire threats remain today in American life. Thus, it is with a view of the broader picture transpiring prior to 1944 that there will be a clearer understanding of the threat posed by a circus tent fire.

Risks at the circus

The circus is a skillfully and carefully blended performance enterprise with a dual, yet intertwined public existence. It is simultaneously uplifting and terrifying, pushing spectators through the full range of emotions. At the same time that it dazzles the audience with spectacle, beauty and athletic achievement, it is embracing danger as humans perilously nullify gravity's grasp, encounter wild animals and entrust their lives to technology that supports, propels and protects them through death-defying maneuvers. While the clowns provoke laughter and mirth to release tensions and anxiety, there is an indelible seriousness to the program, which was carefully executed to fulfill the expectations of Circus Day.

The audience vicariously experiences these co-existing characteristics and in rare cases becomes a participant owing to unplanned circumstances. Examples include escaped or runaway animals, malfunction of performance apparatus, bad behavior by attendees and venue difficulties.

The life-threatening stunts staged under the big top intentionally positioned trained performers in harm's way. That was not the case with customers, the audience, who were there to safely enjoy the stomach-tightening thrills and then safely go home to share the breadth of their experience with family and friends.

For that reason, the horrific loss of 168 lives, and the physical and mental injuries to many others in the big top fire at Hartford, Connecticut, on July 6, 1944, endures as a black mark on the history of the American circus. It has been memorialized by some as "The Day the Clowns Cried," a re-use of the melodramatic title of a 1953 magazine article about the calamity.¹ Every show employee, even the clowns, in hobo makeup and a gait hampered by oversized shoes, stunned in a grief-stricken mental state like other circus employees, tried futilely to assist in the rescue of the doomed victims. They were traumatized by what they experienced during those few minutes and by the ultimate and enduring realization of what had happened in a setting accustomed to releasing happier and uplifted guests back to their homes. Like veterans of the World War II combat then raging, they seldom discussed the tragedy thereafter with others.

Threats in tents

The history of the circus in America includes scores and scores of incidents in which human life was placed at peril, but the probability of any one person being injured or killed in such an incident were very low. The lack of compiled statistics makes it impossible to assess the true risk. Only anecdotes, often widely publicized because they made for extraordinary news, remain as testimony to the perils of circus attendance and employment.

The greatest personal threat to ticket holders were the

tents, the magical tops that rose in their midst and then vanished overnight. The canvas membranes, covering a broad expanse, were juxtaposed against long and spindly poles, held in place by stakes and a network of ropes that brought to mind a Gulliver-like giant tied to the earth. The most frequent culprits in transforming a circus top, from a safe shield against the sun and rain to a threatening giant in motion against those in and around it, were weather conditions and human activity.

Tents were an inherent challenge owing to unpredictable and often rapidly changing weather. High winds, lightning strikes, thunderstorms, downbursts and tornadoes could damage, destroy and flatten a top in seconds. Danger could be present from before the erection of the tops was commenced and remain an unwelcome guest throughout the day and until everything had been taken down and packed away. Ordered and orderly audience evacuation sometimes averted a disaster, but getting a crowd to leave a top in threatening skies or to enter a downpour outside was not a readily executed maneuver. Often there was no safer refuge from the threatening skies. Some were mesmerized and frozen in place by an unfolding disaster, or wanted to witness it, and had to be compelled by showmen to leave the premises. A wind-billowed tent with attached quarter poles dancing around underneath was something to escape. Falling center poles smashed anything in their way.

It was all hands on deck in the event of a fire, or any disaster, regardless of the employee's fame, status, wardrobe or duties.

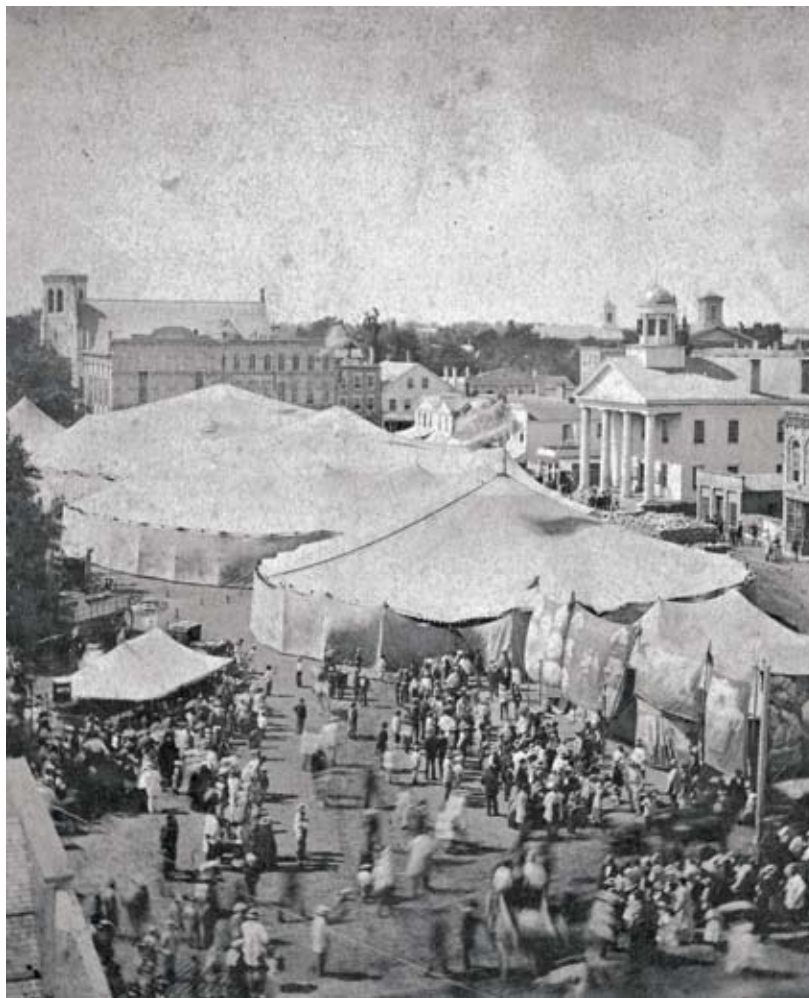
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Tent fires were a miniscule fraction of all burn losses in an era of wooden structures and crude flame illumination. It is forgotten today that the nineteenth century, with common practices such as lit candles on Christmas trees, gas flame wall sconces and chandeliers, and crude electrical power distribution and apparatus, was an era of destructive conflagrations that frequently destroyed massive areas of cities and took countless human lives. The lack or failure of building codes, late development of fire-fighting practices and technology, untrained volunteer in lieu of professional fire fighters and other factors all contributed to an era of tremendous fire losses and tragedies. Disasters still took place subsequent to the evolution of fire-fighting science, building codes and preventative practices – yet – fire remains a societal problem today usually owing to one factor – human action and inaction.

Disasters that have taken lives at the circus suggest to some casual observers a careless attitude by circus people towards their clientele. An examination of period literature strongly disagrees with that position, confirming a bona fide commitment by showmen, especially in the canvas department, to protecting their guests from recognized hazards. Two exceptions are known. The courtroom-determined finding of negligence after the 1944 fire cannot be excused. Another example was the response of a revered showman of the highest stature, P. T. Barnum. He was sleeping in his hotel room at the Palmer House in the early morning hours of June 5, 1883, when he was awakened and informed that his show's performance pavilion was on fire at the Chicago lakefront. Reportedly, he said, "Let her burn; we have a duplicate tent" and as he rolled over to go back to sleep he added that the \$30,000 flame was "amusing the small boys."²

During the 226-year existence of the American circus, with 194 seasons involving tents, fires damaged or partially destroyed about 17 big tops, while six other burnings reduced



The Forepaugh show at Racine, Wisconsin, on June 24, 1869, demonstrated how the tent city had grown since the implementation of a small round top in 1825.

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menagerie, side show and horse-related tents to ashes. Other dangers were also manifest in the circus experience, but none of them, including fire, were ever judged to have an inherent risk so great that a cessation of tent circus existence was mandated by any building code, law or governmental body or agency.

Showmen and the public both knew that the portable circus house was a flammable object, but the incidence of occurrence so low and the possibility of serious injury and death so minimal that it was taken in stride. Given the flammable nature of circus tents, the limited fire-safety possibilities and the opportunity embodied in untold members of the public to unknowingly or willfully start a fire, it is actually remarkable that so few circus tent fires took place.

The opportunities for fire on a circus lot were incredibly numerous, experienced daily, and often non-stop and without any control over them by showmen. They were truly at the mercy of fire. Yet, the vigilance and practices undertaken by showmen minimized the risk for many years.

Consider the numbers. Shortly after 1900, over 100 tent circuses operated in the United States, presenting shows six days per week, two performances per day, during an eight-month outdoor schedule. That equates to about 20,000 engagement dates, yielding about 40,000 annual performances. With tent fires occurring less than once a year, the probability of such an event at that time was far less than one in 40,000.

Circus operations had between two and 40 tents, with daily audiences likely no less than a couple dozen to over 12,000 passing through for every presentation twice a day. Many Americans were addicted to their smoking habits and it only took the reckless and careless behavior of one in an ever-changing series of audiences to cause a disaster.

Naturally occurring lightning that could directly ignite a fire or cause the collapse of lighting apparatus as a tent

collapsed was a major concern, but impossible to control. A railroad locomotive spewing embers or cinders passing by the lot was a common problem and they also accounted for setting show cars on fire, both in static situations and when shows were en route.

Local conflagrations also accounted for their share of fire problems. In some instances adjacent circus tents were threatened by spreading flames or airborne embers. When the Ringling show played Kansas City, Missouri, on August 5, 1901, the big Exposition Building across the street from the lot took fire and posed a threat to the entire canvas city. The show's response was immediate and comprehensive. Reports declaring the loss of the side show top are incorrect.

"Our danger was quickly realized, and immediately everyone connected with the show was on the jump. Should one spark come our way, it would mean destruction to our entire outfit, and, probably, a terrible loss of life. No one can tell. Strong men were working with might and main to save life and property from destruction. Henry Ringling took the situation in at a glance, and saw that the crowds of people who were entering the big show were quietly removed to a place of safety, while those already inside were advised as to the best means for their welfare. The side-show, black top and cook house being nearest the burning building, were quickly loaded and packed up. Husky canvas men climbed the big tops and kept them well saturated with water, for one flying spark would finish us, as the tops are all covered with a coating of paraffin and easily ignited. William Spencer and Pearl Souder, with their forces, were working with red cheeks and set faces, to get their animals removed to a safe place. Charles Roy and his men of the chandelier department had a hard struggle to avoid explosion. Delavan, Meek and Jenkins had already looked out for their horses and ponies.

"Ed. Shipp and the performers were jug-filing trunks to a place of safety — (even the ladies were lending a hand). Allie Webb and his cook-house crew 'were right up against it,' but they stuck until the last dish and piece of canvas was packed away. Looking over from the distance one could see steward Webb standing like a statue, the flames and smoke, at times, coming within close range, giving orders and superintending his boys — and brave boys they were, and justly entitled to much credit. Fred Breese, the chef, looked as if there wasn't much breeze coming his way, but Fred is used to those warm waves. Art Boyd was red in the face, while the two Dicks — Stewart & Ware — sang merrily 'there's a hot time in the old town to-night.' Lew Graham, Borrella and John Walker were kept busy

at the front delivering official announcements, and above it all stood Messrs. Otto and Al. Ringling, quietly delivering orders and directing the entire proceedings.

"In a few minutes the Kansas City Fire Department had run a line of hose on the grounds and were playing a constant stream of water on the tents. They did effective work, but the credit was due, chiefly, to good management, the work of our own brave men and the kind hand of Providence. If the wind had veered a particle in our direction, nothing could have saved us from total destruction. At 3 o'clock the walls toppled in, the big show doors re-opened, side-shows up and doing business and we ate 'supper' in the cook house. The matinee was packed and at night thousands were 'turned away.' This will be a day long to be remembered by all."³

The circus had direct responsibility to manage its own sources of ignition on the lot. These included: tent illumination systems using hundreds of candles, or pine knots, liquid oil and generated gas as fuel; open and on the ground fires; ground and wagon-mounted ranges for preparing food; open electric arc lights (as introduced in 1879); wood or coal fires in steam boilers powering calliopes and cookhouse wagons; internal combustion engine-powered light plants and musical instruments; and more. The tons of combustible materials used in making up the big top and menagerie interiors, as well as bedding and feed in the horse tops were an ever-present risk for ignition.

Weather watchers

Bad weather was recognized as a risk to the lives and well-being of circus-goers, as well as to the employees, animals and physical plant of the show. Proprietors and staffers were always observant to weather conditions and had to decide what to do as they first sensed and then anticipated pending danger.

Most importantly, showmen had to determine what to do with customers who had already paid for tickets and were under the tops. Timing of the decisions was paramount. Little could be done to avoid lightning strikes except to clear out. The tops could be reinforced against winds with additional ropes and stakes, and by re-tightening those already in place. In other instances, tents were dropped, shows cancelled, money refunded and the circus packed up for the move to the next date.

In an era largely lacking in advance weather forecasting, balancing the need to earn revenue against the risk to life and limb was more of an art than a science. It was not until 1925 that weather forecasting became publicly available in limited areas.

Long-time circus animal man George Conklin recalled the concern that his most famous boss had about weather.

An anxious and nervous personality, James A. Bailey was the consummate circus man, interested in little else and asserted mastery over every detail of his operation.

“Mr. Bailey was always nervous about storms, especially when the performance was going on. If it began to look black, he would sit outside on some convenient wagon and watch the clouds. Every canvas foreman and every superintendent who came within speaking distance of him he would call to and ask, ‘What do you think of it?’

“If they replied that it looked bad, he would turn the knife faster and chew harder on the rubber band, and just as soon as he felt the wind begin to blow, he would shout, ‘Conklin, get the elephants outside.’”⁴

Ben Wallace of Peru, Indiana, was another keen observer of the skies. A former press agent of his circus recalled his intelligence gathering system.

“[Wallace] was always on the alert at the approach of the storm. He had come to know the winds and signs of the sky through something like fifty years of experience and when he breathed easily after a scare it was pretty certain that there was no danger. He was out viewing the horizon when others around the show did not consider the chances of a storm worthy of serious consideration.

“When the big show arrived on the lot Mr. Wallace was invariably on the ground and whether the weather was good or bad he had soon struck up a conversation with some of the farmers and without anyone suspecting his purpose gathered what local information regarding storms he felt was of use to



Jimmy Whalen was an affable and long-time boss canvasman with the biggest shows, ready to deal with all challenges regardless of the time of day or weather.

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him. He could pick his man through long experience and there was never but one time that he failed.”

Wallace’s failure was his inability to detect the storm that flooded his circus with several feet of water at Bucyrus, Ohio, on May 30, 1908.⁵

Iowa circus man Fred Buchanan, whose circuses routed through storm-prone areas from the mid-1900s to 1931, was recalled years later as “the best weather prophet” by a veteran staffer. “Sometimes he’d look at a clear sky and tell us to take the show down. Even before we could hit the seats, the rain would start.”⁶

After the proprietor, the most important person on the circus lot in deciding what should be done when observing incoming storms and weather reports was the boss canvasman. One legendary bearer of the title

was James R. “The Whale” Whalen. The subject of numerous interviews and profiles, one reporter advised, “He has been in the circus game 49 years. He moves faster than his men. They say his knowledge of weather is perfect. Never in his long career, has he had a ‘blowdown.’”⁷ While “The Whale” had a long and distinguished career, starting in 1883 and serving as boss with large shows from 1893 to 1938, he was in charge when Ringling-Barnum suffered the blowdown at Washington, D. C., on May 18, 1936.

No one can predict the weather with absolute certainty and despite the best trained eye and experienced hands consulted, havoc was often wreaked upon summer circus operations. Just as people residing in earthquake fault and hurricane-prone regions often do not move away despite the known risks, populations in summer storm areas similarly judged whether it was a good choice to go to the circus if the weather looked questionable. The infrequent and enjoyable diversions in the hinterlands often tipped the decision in favor of attendance; they endured storms as a life ritual.

Blowdowns

The most common tent disaster was the so-called “blowdown.” One occurred when high or freak winds, a thunderstorm or tornado totally or partially flattened a top by literally ripping it loose from the network of ropes and stakes holding it to the ground and permitting gravity to bring it down. The top usually went up and then down, though in wind shear it may literally have wobbled, gone sideways and then to the earth. Countless circus tent blowdowns occurred in American circus history. Some shows sustained multiple events during a single season, the combined result of their tornado alley routing, weather patterns and plain bad luck.

about, and then fell, maiming people and claiming lives during their unpredictable gyrations and descent to the earth. The combination of their elevation, length and weight made them giant and lethal ten pins.

Blowdowns that caused tops and poles to fall also turned interior illumination into fire starters. This was especially so with liquid fuel systems, where containers of oil could spill their contents and rapidly spread the fire.

A howling tornado shredded the pavilion housing James. W. Bancker’s circus in Indiana sometime in the early 1830s, the earliest known blowdown in field show history. Unfortunately, specific details are unknown. His own 1835 troupe routed through the state, but it could also have been



In a blowdown, like this one afflicting the Al G. Barnes show at Helena, Montana, on July 17, 1925, the tent was lifted up and then billowed without form back to earth.

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The heavy, water-laden canvas was a concern with the possibility of a tent collapsing on the patrons in the seats. The situation made egress extremely difficult. Those near the sidewall or an exit could clamber out over or under the seating, if it had not collapsed. Others further in remained trapped until someone cut the canvas with a knife and enabled the shrouded captives to escape. Center poles, stabilized erect independent of the canvas by a network of guy lines, could remain erect, unless splintered by lightning. They were perhaps too heavy for lesser storms to lift and move and fell over when securing ropes failed. Falling or flailing quarter poles were the greatest danger to pavilion occupants. Attached to the top canvas, they danced, twirled

an aggregation of which he was the manager. The center pole was broken, the seats collapsed, a performer was injured and several citizens were killed, perhaps for the first time in a circus tent accident.⁸

The second earliest discovered destruction of a tent, by a “Great storm of wind and rain with heavy thunder, in the evening,” took place at Albany, New York, on October 23, 1849. No other details are known.⁹

In the aftermath of a 1910 storm incident to be related later, Al Ringling recalled the World’s Greatest Shows blowdown at Crookston, Minnesota, on July 5, 1899, as the second worst incident in his long career. The wretched condition of the damaged tents and requisite repairs, along with



The aftermath of a blowdown, like this 1924 Al G. Barnes incident, was a mass of wet, rumpled and torn canvas amidst a confusion of poles, ropes and other circus properties that had to be arduously unscrambled and placed in good order for the next performance, or load out.

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relief and recovery for the staff and employees caused cancellation of the next day's performances at Fargo, ND.

The Norris & Rowe show suffered a blowdown at Princeton, Indiana on October 22, 1909. The collapse caught many of the 1200 patrons under the canvas. Knives were produced and used to slice penetrations that enabled them to escape. Quite a few people were injured, but no lives were lost. The lights had been extinguished by the wind and that prevented the incident from becoming a major disaster. Two runaway elephants and horses were found and brought back to the lot without incident.¹¹

A blowdown with one death was sustained by Barnum & Bailey at Uniontown, Pennsylvania, on June 1, 1917, caused by a tornado that led to the cancellation of the performance. It was the second of a pair of back-to-back blowdowns, the show having sustained one the day before at McKeesport, Pennsylvania. The start of the matinee, usually early in the afternoon, had been delayed until after 5:00 PM and that is when the collapse took place. The band had just commenced to play when observers stated that a small funnel descended from blackened skies and lifted and then tossed the tent. The center and quarter poles went down creating a jumble of smashed apparatus and a wet canvas. The lateness of the show caused many to go home, reducing the crowd and thereby lessening the number of those who were hurt; it could have been much worse. Six elephants and horses escaped their positions and ran around the grounds, causing

general havoc and panic. The death of a 32-year old woman was not caused by physical injury, but reportedly from the fright experienced in the episode, the cause given as heart failure. The night performance was cancelled.¹²

Lightning strikes

Lightning was an ever-present danger to showmen, while en route overland between communities and on the lot. It usually accompanied a thunderstorm, but heat lightning is a common phenomenon. Patrons could endure a rainstorm and windy conditions, and take action against a blowdown, but nothing could prepare for or avoid an instantaneous lightning strike. After storms, they were the most frequently experienced hazard, and the most feared, causing severe injuries and death.

A selection of lightning-focused episodes provides an overview of the mayhem caused by the electrical discharges. There is documentation for dozens of other incidents impacting traveling shows.

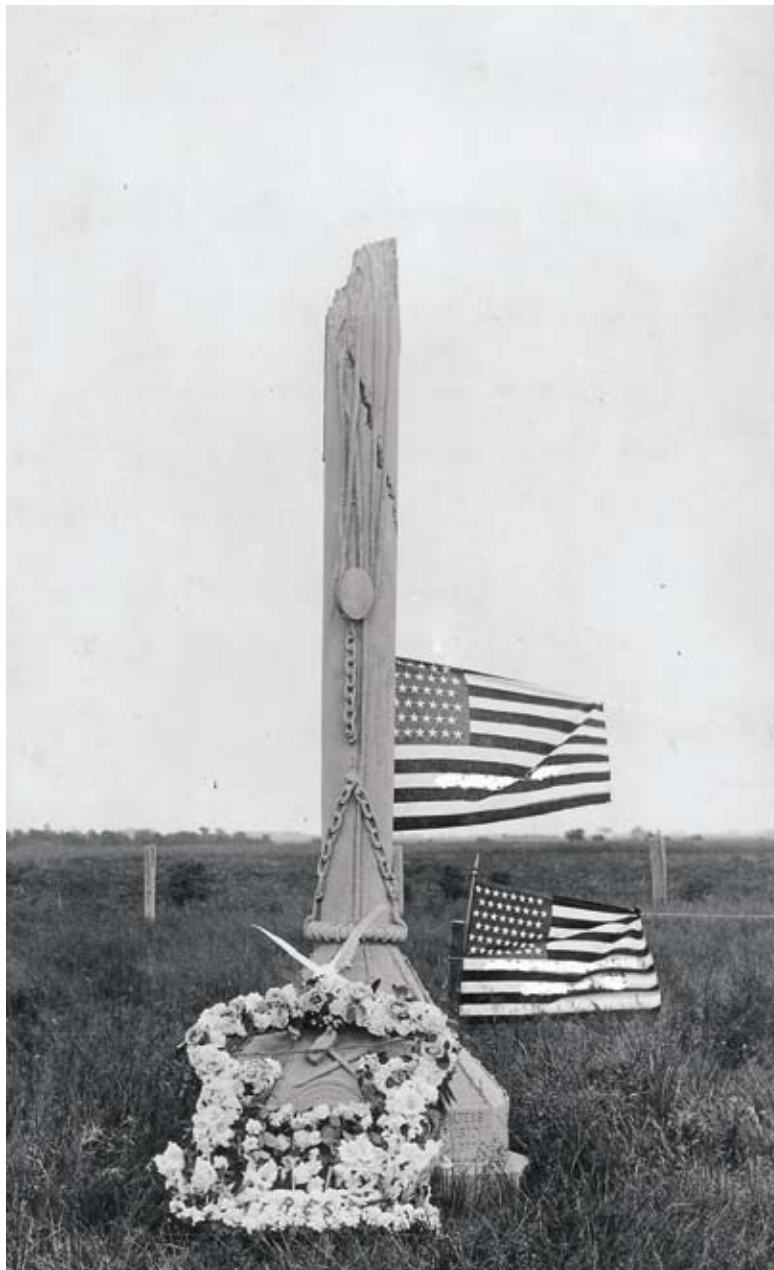
At Kingston, New York, on the evening of August 25, 1870, a crowd of about 3,000 people gathered to enjoy the evening show of G. F. Bailey & Co.'s Circus. It had been a sultry 92-degree day and people sought to enjoy the experience by avoiding the matinee heat and humidity. Some 1,500 were already in the pavilion when a thunderstorm hit hard with heavy rain and powerful thunder. The show's response was noteworthy. "A panic was imminent, but the proprietor of

the circus with great presence of mind shouted 'keep your seats,' and ordered the band to play while the ringmaster urged the horses through the little pools of water, hoping to attract the attention of the audience. The clown cracked his jokes and laughed, but with a hollow unnatural tone. While this was transpiring the lightning had done its work outside." Following the start of the rain, an awesome lightning bolt killed five African Americans who were gathered with others in a small group outside the tent, with five more dying the next day. Their group had huddled in a concession stand under a willow tree, where they were happily sharing the experience until their lives were instantaneously snuffed out. The lightning strike punched a twelve-foot square hole in the canvas and stunned many, causing the show to be discontinued. "The scene in the main tent was one first of stupid amazement and then of wild terror. The reporters assert that hundreds of people found themselves unable to rise from their seats, as the audience in general passed to the door; but whether the tem-

porary paralysis was the direct effect of lightning or of fright may not be certain."¹³ Other reports of equivalent incidents make similar mention of the bewilderment, confusion and inability to respond as witnessed that night at Kingston.

Seven lives were lost and 20 people were injured inside the Ringling Bros. menagerie at River Falls, Wisconsin on June 21, 1893. Lightning struck a center pole of the tent just as the crowd had left the big top, having decided not to remain for the concert in the tent.

"The scene of consternation which followed when the survivors realized the extent of the fa-



A poignant memorial to the two workingmen who lost their lives during a Ringling blowdown at Wahpeton, North Dakota, on June 10, 1897, remains standing today.

Circus World Museum

lost their lives. The episode was memorialized in a stone monument of a broken pole, a Victorian era symbol of life cut short. A collection taken up immediately by workingmen funded the burials of their colleagues and the monument that was erected in their memory on September 29.¹⁵

On May 11, 1905, the Great Wallace Shows incurred a lightning strike at Marietta, Ohio, hitting a side show center pole. A local person was killed, and four others were stunned. It happened while the show was underway in the adjacent big top. Management was later commended for maintaining order through the end of the ring show by deciding not to announce what had transpired nearby.¹⁶

tality surpasses description, when men and women surged toward the scene, and it was only by the exercise of rare presence of mind on the part of Messrs. Ringling and their employees that a most serious and probably fatal stampede was averted. The Ringlings did everything possible to alleviate the sufferings of the injured. Rough canvasmen, stake drivers and animal attendants vied with one another in their attentions to the wounded."

A small fire was also started, but it was rapidly extinguished by workingmen.¹⁴

As canvasmen erected the Ringling Bros. big top at Wahpeton, North Dakota, on June 10, 1897, the awful power of lightning was demonstrated when a bolt hit a big top center pole. Twenty-two men laboring around the mud block at the pole base were "knocked senseless," and two of them



Preparation of the heated paraffin and gasoline that waterproofed the tent canvas was accomplished with a hooded and vented, open wood fire that surrounded the drums containing the mixture.

Circus World Museum

Smoking in the tents

Showmen, especially the men associated with tents, were fully aware of the risk that smoking materials presented to the tops. The tents were their livelihood: to unload and erect; to tear down and load out at night; and to tend and protect during the day. Given less than about two dozen fire incidents in 194 years, they generally did a diligent and commendable job.

There is limited documentation as to exactly how showmen attempted to control smoking inside the tents and in their general areas. The concern about indoor smoking then was not human or animal internal health, or second-hand smoke, but the danger presented by an array of combustible materials to the top and the people and animals in it.

It was a never-ending battle to observe and identify those who insisted on indulging in their habit and to get them to adjust their behavior by complying with the request, or a firm instruction, to cease the activity and safely dispose of the waste.

The biggest challenge arose with those who entered the seats and then proceeded to light up, out of eye shot of showmen distributed around the grounds. Unless there was a telltale wisp of smoke, or a response by those seated adjacent, surreptitious smokers went about their threatening behavior, sometimes with deadly or costly results.

In 1853, an Irish railroad worker at a circus declined to

extinguish his pipe, which had offended ladies sitting near him. He refused to obey, in a vulgar manner, and show attaches physically ejected him. Their action precipitated a riot by his peers, necessitating the sheriff of Somerset, Ohio, to call in troops to suppress the well-armed gang. The incident went far beyond the daily “recreational fighting” to which showmen were accustomed.¹⁷

Show attaches announced against public smoking in circus tents and segregated the activity to outside or designated areas. Charles H. Day, press agent for Den Stone’s Grand Circus of 1878, related, “A feature of all announcements was, ‘Smoking in the tent not tolerated and most positively prohibited. A corps of uniformed ushers in attendance.’”¹⁸

An 1881 Forepaugh tent diagram depicts a “Gents Smoking Apartment,” in the connection between the menagerie and the performance tops. The designated smoking location was conceived with the thought that all such activity would take place safely, under controlled and monitored conditions; and away from those that didn’t enjoy the aroma and discharge from smoking materials.¹⁹

Knowing that addicted smokers would indulge in their passion despite every expressed caution, some shows positioned workingmen under the seats to assure that any flagrantly dropped cigarettes would not ignite an inferno. It was a never-ending battle in which a few ticket holders endangered many others with their errant behavior.



The hot paraffin and gasoline mixture was applied to the canvas using conventional sprinkling cans and brooms, the critical part being to have just the right amount per unit of surface area.

Circus World Museum

Waterproofing and fire retardant treatments for circus tents

Circus tops were made of thin, light weight, canvas material, intentionally so, to lessen their mass during transit, erection and while in the air. These materials, of themselves, were not water tight, requiring them to be treated to shed, rather than to absorb or pass through water.

Exactly when circus men started to treat their canvas tops with treatments to make them “waterproof” is unknown. The construction and process must not have been entirely satisfactory in the first two decades after their introduction in 1825. In 1847 Welch’s National Circus advertised that it had a “Water Proof Pavilion” whereas Spalding’s North American Circus aggrandized “The Leviathan Double Water Proof Pavilion!” The inference was that not all tents protected the occupants against rain, even when treated, and that improved methods were being introduced.²⁰ The absence of further commentary from that time forward suggests that the rainfall generally ceased to penetrate the top and wet the spectators. How tents were waterproofed during that time period has not been learned.

For decades, the tops were waterproofed by unrolling the pieces flat on the ground and then hot mopping an open-flame heated mixture of paraffin and gasoline onto the surface. When done with proper precautions and care, the process yielded a waterproof top that was also very flammable.



John Snellen was a modest man of great responsibility, who crafted a memoir that provides significant insight on one big top fire and associated topics.

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In a somewhat legalistic statement prepared after the 1910 Barnum show big top fire, boss canvasman John H. "Happy Jack" Snellen related his knowledge of the tent waterproofing practice as then in use. It was a duty accomplished in winter quarters, after the annual completion of a new complement of tents in the show's own tent loft or by a manufacturer specializing in their design and construction. Tent proposals of the 1910s quoted a price of three cents per square foot to apply the waterproofing paraffin. The largest shows generally slated indoor building debuts from March into April. The waterproofing was done outdoors, as weather permitted, finished in time so that the tent pieces could be folded, bundled and loaded into wagons taken by the outdoor train that went to the first under canvas engagement of the tour.

The tent had been paraffined at the usual time (about the middle of April.)

"About eight gallons of paraffin is melted hot and while hot is poured into a fifty gallon barrel of gasoline and thoroughly mixed while hot. There is no other known way of thinning the consistency of paraffin except by mixing it with gasoline; it is spread while hot on the canvas with a sprinkling can, the canvas being spread on the ground when new. The canvas remains on the ground in the sun two days after this treatment until thoroughly dried and the gasoline all evaporated. There is no other known method of waterproofing the tent.

"Not only is the gasoline entirely evaporated and eliminated from this canvas but there never has been a fire from any of this canvas when rolled up after the treatment. It also preserves it against mildew.

"There is treatment for the purpose of waterproofing which consists of linseed oil and beeswax, but by the use of this treatment, canvas when rolled up will be susceptible to spontaneous combustion.

"We have been waterproofing the canvas in the method first described since about 1895."

The document was prepared at the request of, or in consultation with attorney John M. Kelley, who became the Ringling legal representative after resolving the lawsuit that was filed after the show blowdown at Maryville, Missouri, on September 18, 1905. Inserted into the Snellen statement are two pages of remarks that seem to be talking points that Kelley would emphasize in any subsequent legal action or court proceeding. He wrote: "We have never had a fire as the result of our method of waterproofing. No spontaneous combustion or otherwise. It is Snellen's opinion (how many others) that this canvas treated in that way and thoroughly dried in the manner indicated is less flammable and less subject to spontaneous combustion than if not treated at all,

or if treated by other methods."²¹

The methodology described by Snellen was the one included by tent expert Ernest Chandler in his authoritative 1914 book on the topic. The last two topics in the volume cover "Mildew-Proofing Preparations" and "Paraffining." The former was an applied chemical preparation. The latter was a physical process that consisted of hot mopping a mixture of one part of paraffin wax mixed in with four parts of benzene. Chandler observed, "The inflammable nature of these materials is so well understood that it is hardly necessary to add that the greatest caution must be exercised in its preparation." Yet, he made no statement as to the effect of the treatment on the finished product, the waterproofed canvas.

The method of application described for tents is the one documented in circus photography. "When waterproofing large areas, such as represented by the top of a large tent, it is usual to spread the preparation in the form of a fine spray. A watering pot is admirably adapted for this purpose and by covering the nozzle with a fine wire gauze, the preparation may be spread to better purpose, with less effort and a minimum of waste, by the employment of this method."²²

Veteran circus owner Charlie Sparks made a comment to his close friend and confidante, Bert Cole, that indicates the waterproofing process was not as simple and foolproof as it seems, prone to problems of an undefined nature. He wrote on September 28, 1923: "We have a new [big] top but done a bum job of parrifing [sic] and it leaks terrible."²³ Chandler observed that the application had to be relatively thin, so as to not make the canvas inflexible. The Sparks crew may have erred in applying it too thinly. Chandler later indicated that the application was sometimes renewed in mid-season.

One source declares that long-time tent repertoire theater operator Colonel W. I. Swain devised a superior waterproofing methodology during World War I, but that it was secured by the government and not made available to the public until after the 1944 Hartford disaster. The inference was that the treatment was not only water shedding, but fire resistant or retardant.²⁴ Unfortunately, Mickel fails to provide a reference for the claim.

Mickel's statement about availability is perhaps not entirely accurate. A representative for the 1944 Clyde Beatty-Russell Bros. Circus declared after the Hartford incident that their tents were fireproofed. William B. Antes was quoted saying, "The Los Angeles fire marshal's office directed the fireproofing of the canvas at the start of the circus there last spring."²⁵

In a 1922 paper addressing wooden highway bridge fire protection the challenge to make materials both waterproof and fire retardant was clearly declared: "The difficulty with the chemical treatment is that the chemicals will either wash out or, if waterproof, are not fire resistive."²⁶

The manner in which shows cooked food varied greatly, from open campfire heating of large vats to wagon mounted

boilers and ranges. Showmen who utilized cooking tents with ground-mounted portable stoves having exhaust stacks surrounded the penetrations through the top with an asbestos ring, to isolate the canvas from the hot stove pipe. In 1917, the United States Tent & Awning Company proposed selling a complete canvas outfit to the John Robinson 10 Big Shows. Among the many tops for the big railroad show, the largest ever fielded by Jerry Mugivan and Bert Bowers, were two eighteen by twenty-foot rectangular kitchen tents. Of interest, the proposal stated "Tops to be fireproofed [sic]." None of the other tops received that treatment and exactly how it was accomplished was not stated.²⁷

There were some new waterproofing and mildew resisting products advertised to showmen in the early 1920s and one of them claimed to be "fire resisting." In 1920, the Robeson-Preservo Company of Port Huron, Michigan, boasted that showmen who used their product had packed houses, rain or shine, because of their superior waterproofing and preservative treatment.²⁸ The product reportedly existed early in the 20th century but it was successful applications in military use that spread use of the product via a broad advertising campaign.

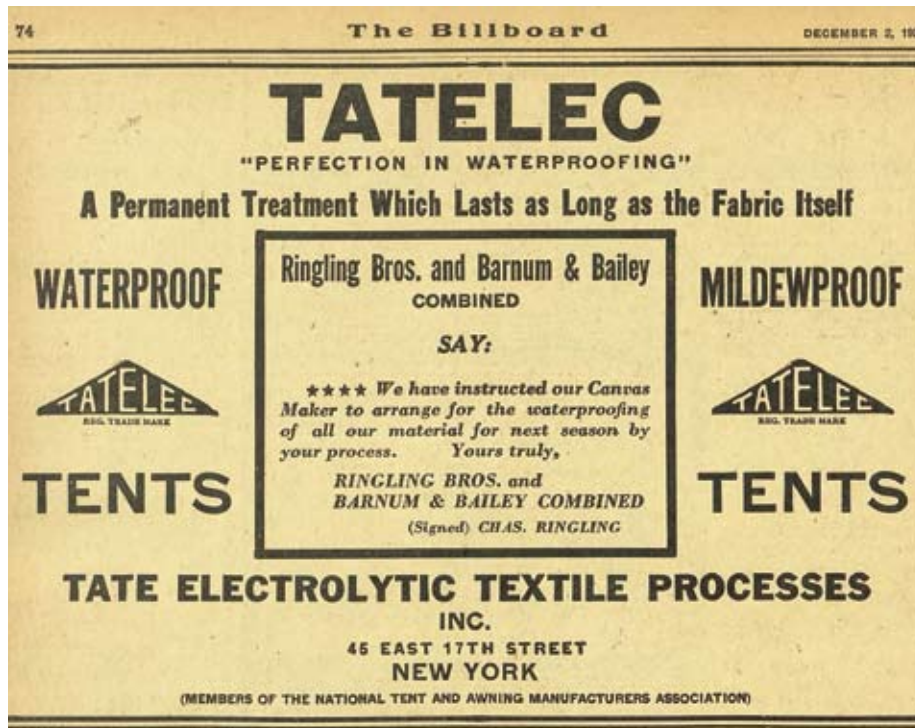
Another applied treatment called Tatelec was claimed to be the "Perfection in waterproofing" and also provided protection against mildew. Advertised by the Tate Electrolytic Textile Processes Inc. of New York City in 1922, it carried a quoted endorsement from Charles Ringling, who served as general manager of Ringling-Barnum. "We have instructed our Canvas Maker to arrange for the waterproofing of all our material for next season by your process." It was a pretty strong endorsement. Nothing further is known of the arrangement.²⁹

Taking a step beyond mere treated canvas, W. F. & G. Proofing Co. of Brooklyn, New York, promoted Jatón Cloth, claiming it as special made for circus use. It was sold as being watertight, mildew-proof and fire-resisting. The "extraordinary strength" material was suggested for use in tents, aw-

nings and banners.³⁰ A related product may be Jatón Fabric, sold by the Wood Conversion Company of Chicago in 1932. The cotton duck was specially prepared for impregnation with a vegetable compound that increased strength 20% while making it mildew and oil proof. Further processing

made it fire-resistant.³¹ The exact nature and content of Preservo, Tatelec and Jatón Cloth/Fabric have not been determined. If they replaced the conventional waterproofing method it was not confirmed in trade literature.

Tent expert Ernest Chandler addressed the topic of tent care and related issues in the early 1930s, when the industry was taking a financial beating. He provided a snapshot of state of the art waterproofing and fire safety.



There is some evidence suggesting that showmen experimented with new chemicals in the 1910s and 1920s, but waterproofing and fireproofing techniques commonly defeated each other.

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"Most all tents in use today are either made of some kind of waterproof canvas or have had one kind or another of waterproofing applied. In the case of larger circuses, I believe they nearly all stick to the old method – paraffin . . . They are usually paraffined by the circus owners on the lot at the first stand, or sometimes in winter quarters when they have the room and the permission to do so.

"The usual composition is yellow paraffin mixed with gasoline in the proper proportions. This composition, if properly mixed, does not affect the wearing qualities of the canvas – in fact, it helps preserve it.

"There are many waterproof canvases made and they are widely used in smaller jobs. They are all very effective and do what is claimed for them, but of course they are a little more costly than the ordinary canvases.

"Of course paraffining makes a tent highly inflammable and extreme care must be used at all times to prevent ignition. It is almost criminal for any show that has a paraffined top to be without

workable, accessible fire extinguishers with the outfit. It is also a good idea to have a number of swabs on long poles at hand, so that a fire in the top can be quickly and easily reached.

“While speaking of fire, which will sometimes happen, it is not out of order to suggest that for mast guys, special wind guys and other long main stays, it is much safer if, instead of manila rope which is generally used, flexible wire rope is used. In case of a serious fire, where the canvas and ropes are quickly consumed, the wire ropes will hold the center poles in the air, keeping them from falling on the spectators. Apart from this, your poles will always be perpendicular and solid, as the contraction and expansion are hardly noticeable. They make for added safety and should be used with all big tops.”³²

Unfortunately, the good advice from this highly respected tent designer was unread, ignored, forgotten, or not put into action. Implementation of his recommendations may have saved lives in 1944.

Before the flames

Disaster preparedness is a rather new concept and not one that was known as such by 19th and early 20th century circus proprietors and department heads. No internal memos on the topic have been found, nor is there any commentary in contemporary newspapers. At best we have the recollections penned by “Happy Jack” Snellen subsequent to the 1910 Barnum & Bailey fire. They reveal that there were procedures that were in place to deter smokers and to detect and deal with fires.

Much of the preparedness was based on the availability of a large number of workingmen. While not erecting tents, handling props or otherwise occupied, they could be placed in positions of observation, to protect the physical plant and people. While not well-educated for the most part, they did generally adhere to the discipline imposed on all employees to follow orders. When they could be observed by the boss canvasman and crew heads they generally accomplished the tasks assigned. Longer term, multi-seasonal employees that toured for years in succession were generally very allegiant to the show and were quite protective of it, fellow employees and the visiting general public.

The 1910 Barnum & Bailey big top fire is the only one for which there is an account from an involved participant. As related above, boss canvasman Happy Jack Snellen committed his immediate recollections to writing, in the event they would be needed for any subsequent lawsuit filed against the circus. What follows are excerpts from his typescript, likely as prepared by an assistant to show attorney John M. Kelley. The order of entries and has been edited; and spelling and punctuation have been corrected, updated or slightly revised for clarity and continuity.

“The fire started about 2:30 in the afternoon. The grand entry was mounted and ready to come in and the show would have opened in from two to five minutes. They were all ready to enter. At this time all the men were on duty. The big top tent was fully constructed; every pole in place; all stakes driven; all ropes tightened; and everything regular.

“At the time the fire started there were the following men on duty, distributed in and about the big top as follows:

- “1. Approximately 350 men outside. This includes 150 big top canvas men and about 150 grooms (the horse stables being about 100 feet from the big top on the opposite end from which the fire started); 80 or 90 cookhouse men (the cook house being just beyond the horse tents); and 10 or 15 wardrobe men; 12 or 15 chandelier men.
- “2. About 25 men under the seats, distributed around and in the big top on duty.
- “3. About 40 property men standing idly, ready to go to work when the show opened; 40 ushers on duty; 20 ticket sellers; and about 25 candy butchers.
- “4. At this time, the show being mounted and ready to enter, all performers were in readiness for action. There were at least 150 men performers, many of them having netting and apparatus constructed belonging to them, and these men, together with others, did everything in their power to extinguish the fire.”

Snellen’s statement acknowledged that the circus had a means to announce the detection of fire. Men were also armed with buckets of water, for emergency use. The show *did* have a plan that was put into place prior to the events that unfolded that day. How early such preparedness was undertaken and what was included in the organized effort is unknown.

“The men discovered the fire around the back end as soon as it started and the danger signal was given by Robert Wise, who at that time was assistant boss canvasman. After that time several whistles were blown. Even after that, I blew the danger whistle again and everybody was on duty on the ground. All drivers had buckets full of water and were on the ground. They tried to get up on the seats and dash water on the canvas but the effort was not successful. There were 50 or more trying to get up there with water buckets but could not stop the fire by the efforts they were able to make.”

Loud, readily-heard and recognized signals provided an order to everyday life, including church, school and fire house bells, factory whistles, fog horns and other signal devices. Al Ringling had introduced the pea whistle, replacing the handbell that Dan Castello had used on the 1870s Barnum show to signal act changes in the ring. Ready at a moment's notice, apparently a special series of whistle blasts was acknowledged to be the "disaster call," mandating the immediate mobilization of all available personnel, who were already in a status of preparedness for action. Heard above the din and noise always present, the shrill whistle blasts had other uses at the circus. They served to signal the start of the performance, as well as the act changes; guided start and stop motions by horse teams, elephants and crews of workmen, as needed by circus train crews, in the loading and unloading of wagons; and also in activities required to erect and lower the tents.

Circus tent fires

The discussion that follows is an initial attempt to enumerate and characterize the pre-1944 American circus tent fires that took place in the United States. An earlier and simpler effort lumped in disasters that afflicted circuses traveling on steamboats, in performance structures and at winter quarters, aboard railroad cars and others unrelated to the canvas enclosures.³³ Those have been excluded from this effort, along with others that were judged to be ambiguous in nature or not adequately documented as to be acceptable for inclusion.³⁴

It is admittedly not a totally comprehensive listing as coverage of the events was uneven. Local newspaper and trade industry magazines were inconsistent in their reporting. More examples are likely to be discovered as additional documentation is digitized and search techniques enhanced in the future.³⁵

A limited search for circus tent fires in the United States has located 23 separate incidents. Some fires were readily extinguished; most caused at least some damage, while in others entire big tops were lost. There was never a general conflagration wiping out numerous tents on a lot. At worst, the loss of three small tents, adjacent to one another, was once experienced.

Loss of life by circus tent fire was not a common occurrence; in fact, it was unknown until 1944. There is at this time no verified account of a circus tent fire causing loss of life. Total injuries and deaths from blowdowns and lightning strikes are documented and remained unsurpassed until the 1944 Hartford tragedy.

Big tops that caught fire were totally destroyed in nine instances and partially to minimally damaged, in eight others. Partial losses were enabled with early detection, when fires had not yet reached the top canvas and when rains accompanying blowdowns extinguished the flames. Rarely was it possible to save a big top in which the fire got ahead of

the tent men trying to save it, even they put their lives at risk fighting high atop the flaming canvas.

Eleven of the 17 circus big top fires involved tent illuminating systems. Five more, and probably a sixth, were caused when illumination devices were brought into contact with the canvas by blowdowns. Another five fires were caused by illumination systems that were involved with accidents, or negligent operation. Liquid fuel lamps, with the oil and gasoline fuel stored in tanks and metered into the burners, were the principal culprit. The earlier candle and generated gas chandeliers, and the later electric lights, were not as danger prone.

Smoking was the second most common type of big top fire ignition. Two were attributed to cigar smokers; a third by a cigarette; and a sidewall fire was likely careless smoking, too. Show attaches diligently worked to eliminate all smoking, but it was a battle that was impossible to win 100% of the time. The 1942 menagerie fire was intentional arson, in which a lit cigarette was used.

Two big tops were lost to fires started by embers from external sources; a passing railroad steam locomotive and a building burning adjacent to the lot. Shows battled against local building fires, grass fires and other incendiary dangers adjacent to the lot.

Negligent use of a torch caused one horse top fire and the cause of two others is unknown, as is the loss of a dressing top. The cause of some fires will never be known.

The documented fire incidents

The earliest known American circus tent to be destroyed by fire may have been the pavilion of the Mabie menagerie lost at Council Bluffs, Iowa, on August 2, 1864. This was an overland outfit, traveling by horse and wagons over the roads and paths then available for navigation. As the night show was underway a storm arose and upended the tent, lifting it "higher than a kite" before it was "entirely consumed by fire." In the collapse and tumult that followed it is likely that the chandeliers ignited the canvas.³⁶ A second source, dated a decade later, reported that the lights were suddenly extinguished by the blowdown, and the shredding of the tent. The conflicting accounts mandate further study.³⁷

The second incident is the first in which illumination definitely ignited the blaze that caused the loss. It is also the first tent loss for which most aspects of knowledge are available. An estimated \$10,000 loss was sustained by proprietor Pardon A. Older. His circus, museum and menagerie did a date at Reedsburg, Wisconsin, on September 20, 1871, and when preparing to leave the following morning for Baraboo a torch, presumably being used for illumination, accidentally set fire to the bedding in one of three horse tops. It happened when the canvasmen, hostlers and drivers were taking breakfast at a hotel in the community, leaving a minimum number of people to deal with the situation. Of 150 horses with the outfit, 80 were in the three tents that burned. Of



The 1902 Ringling show illuminated their tops with elevated oil chandeliers, the U-shaped fuel reservoirs hugging the poles. They were lifted and held in place with ropes.

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them 19 died of their injuries and 21 were severely injured. One was a ring horse; the others were baggage stock.³⁸

There were several incidents when fires were brought under control before an entire top was destroyed. The pavilion of W. W. Cole's New York and New Orleans Circus was nearly lost to flames during a stormy performance at the closing date in the winter quarters community of Quincy, Illinois, on November 4, 1874. The can containing the oil fuel for the elevated lamps surrounding the center pole began to leak and the stream caught fire. The chandelier was lowered in an attempt to extinguish the flames with a carpet, which then caught fire and spread the flames to the ropes that reached up the pole to the canvas, giving it the appearance of a Roman candle. Happening while the second act was performing, the audience realized what was transpiring and took flight from the seats, taking for the exit or sliding between the seats to the ground and exiting via the sidewall. Some took off for home, but the majority remained at the site, where workingmen succeeded in extinguishing the burning ropes, before it spread further up to the canvas. Newspapers reported on the event, but the item provided for publication

in the *New York Clipper* only noted that the proceeds went to the Woodland Home Orphan Institution.³⁹

There is a tertiary report of a pavilion fire caused by a blowdown that knocked down the lamps, which set fire to the top and destroyed it. "Many were killed and some were injured." It was reported as taking place in Canal Dover, Ohio, the timeframe was bracketed as being between 1870 and 1879, the name of the aggregation not given.⁴⁰ Searching has uncovered an eyewitness account that was originally published in the *Canton (Ohio) Repository* of September 3, 1878 that fits the information. The Sells Bros. circus was at Canal Dover the day before. A blowdown flattened the tent, which was ignited by the lamps and partially consumed by the resulting fire. The account related that "The scene of terror and confusion which followed is represented as beyond the power of description." Yet, no one was killed, no one was seriously injured. Beyond the tent and appurtenances the principal casualty was a badly damaged bandwagon. An earlier account advised that the circus had been completely wrecked and may have been inadvertently amplified, in error.⁴¹

Placing the big top in perspective

The tent circus was a one ring show throughout the initial overland era that commenced in 1825. It continued as such in 1872, the first year of sustained and successful railroad operations of great magnitude. In 1873 a second ring was added owing to audience growth and ticket demands. It was suggested as the solution to a problem; seated customers wanted to be closer to the action. A broad hippodrome track separated them physically from the ring curb and growing the tent in an oval shape made the remoteness even greater. A second ring reduced the distance.

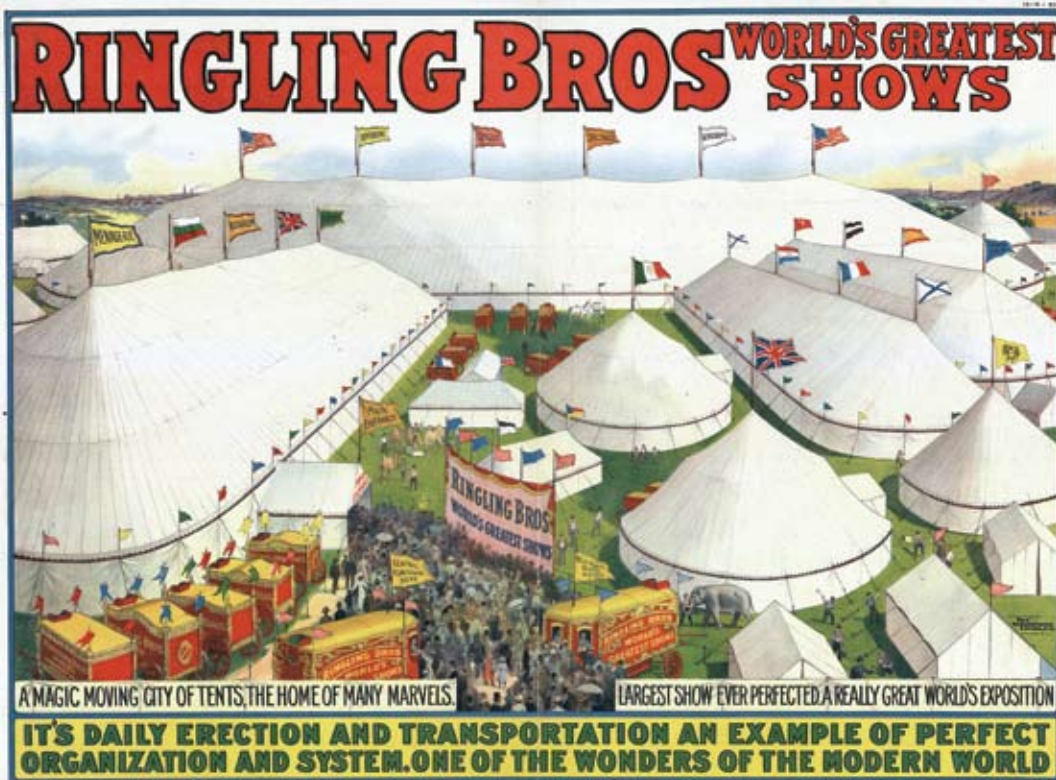
Early tops of 60 feet in diameter ballooned out to well

that it began to be consistently identified by a new name – big top. This terminology was infrequently used starting in the late 1870s and then went into popular use from about 1883 to 1891.

Tent diameters reached 200 feet, a size that could be accommodated in city blocks. The length grew to 500 feet to accommodate three rings, four stages and a hippodrome track, and in some instances to 560 feet. Big tops had grown from having a footprint of slightly less than 3,000 square feet to over 100,000 square feet, an area equivalent to two NFL football fields, in the century after they were adopted as the circus traveling home. It could readily seat

ten to twelve thousand spectators at a single performance and in one jammed straw house in 1924 accommodated over 16,000.

The performance pavilion was first augmented with a dressing room, then further accompanied with an “outside” or side show top, horse tents, tops for the camp outfit (food preparation and serving, and lodging on the lot), menagerie tent, concession stands, and a host of others that became a “Magic City” that moved by night. The moving city sourced water, food, animal feed and bedding, and other supplies locally, but otherwise was self-sufficient by



An abundance of giant white tents was an iconic symbol of the presence of a circus. This 1913 Ringling lithograph reminded viewers of the logistical rituals that took place every day on circus lots across the country.

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over 100 feet, enabled by the introduction of quarter poles in 1847. The change initiated a progressive increase in the size of performance tents and their seating capacity. The pavilions in use ranged from initially holding hundreds to those that could seat thousands of attendees.

Growing audiences resulted in a third ring in 1881, with the addition of two stages between the three rings in 1890. The performance pavilion had grown so large

planning and action. In abided by local and state laws, but was primarily responsible for assuring that their premises were safe and secure. Showmen were obligated to monitoring public activities around and inside the tents in their desire to provide a safe experience for their patrons.

For further information on the topic, see the author's article "The American Circus Tent," in Susan L. Weber et al, *The American Circus*, (2012), pp. 200-231.

The first performance pavilion belonging to a large railroad tent circus that was lost to flames was erected by Barnum & London at Chicago in 1883. The show's engagement started on June 4, with Barnum personally addressing the afternoon audience, and ran for ten days. Between 2:00 A.M. 4:00 A.M. on the second day, the smokestack of an Illinois Central railroad locomotive passing by the lot issued a glowing ember that landed on the tent and initiated a fast-spreading blaze. The local fire department and show employees arrived too late to save the canvas. The efforts did spare the dressing room and menagerie from destruction. Crews were also able to prevent the ignition of the large store of kerosene on the lot, used in the chandeliers. The show lost just one performance, being able to put the last year's tent back into service and resume operations the same day, but booked a loss estimated to be between \$15,000 and \$30,000.⁴²

Between four and five thousand people were reportedly in the Nathans & Co. pavilion for the night show on July 24, 1883 at Portsmouth, Virginia. The winds of an approaching storm first caused the top to sway and then they tore an opening that another gust extended from the sidewall to a center pole. The performance tried to continue, but pandemonium commenced when poles started to fall, causing the audience to head for the nearest exit. Panic ensued with the shout of "fire!" The chandeliers had set the canvas on fire. The rain began to pour and put out the fire after it burned half the top. Some heroic men fought the fire while others helped women and children escape by making holes in the sidewall. Unfortunately, some that escaped fast on one side fell into a briar-choked, five-foot deep ditch, where they piled up on one another. The scene was made all the more terrifying as community fire bells and steam whistles added to the din, their sounds drawing out more people to the spectacle. There were numerous injuries, but no loss of life.⁴³

A troupe bearing the title of O'Brien, Astley and Handenberger Circus, with Van Amburgh's Menagerie, reportedly lost a horse top housing ring horses in Pennsylvania. The date was unspecified, but it was likely to have been sometime between 1883 and 1885, when John V. "Pogey" O'Brien's "Six Big Shows" toured under advertising including varying uses of those venerable names. It was a railroad outfit of ill-repute that sometimes dropped the usual fifty-cent ticket price to just 25, and still did little to satisfy ticket buyers. Various fights with locals, some of considerable magnitude were reported, as well as an 1883 blowdown, but no fire reports were discovered that might provide verification or further definition of the event.⁴⁴

A gasoline-fired chandelier was the source of ignition that beset the small circus fielded by George W. McDonald and F. E. Wells out of Paris, Illinois, on April 21, 1892. Before the doors were opened at Robinson, Illinois, on a date in May, the light somehow became dislodged from the usual elevated position, hit the ground and immediately caused

a fire that destroyed most of the big top. The enterprising owners cleared away the debris and gave a "blue sky" performance under the stars, using improvised lamps. The show went on to Sullivan, where it was flooded out and eventually legal action for unpaid musician wages and hotel bills compelled a sheriff to gather the revenues at the door, which spelled the end of the troupe.⁴⁵

Coincidentally, another one ring outfit, F. W. Pike's Prairie Queen Circus out of Charlotte, Michigan, also experienced the dropping of an oil chandelier in an appearance at Jackson, Michigan, on June 6, 1892. It broke, starting the fire that caused panic and destroyed the \$600 tent. One woman was injured in the seats.⁴⁶ Pike's show later reopened with another tent.

The first fire on the Ringling Bros. circus took place at Paris, Tennessee, on October 16, 1895. Over an hour into the matinee someone shouted "fire," frightening the audience and starting confusion. The sidewall of the big top had caught fire and about 20 feet was consumed before "The heroic efforts of some of the [Ringling] men saved the tent." The uninterrupted continuation of the program, to completion, was credited with averting a full-scale panic.⁴⁷ It seems likely that careless use of smoking materials was the cause.

The second Ringling fire badly damaged but did not entirely destroy one or more horse tents at Janesville, Wisconsin, on July 30, 1901. An adjacent blacksmith top also took fire and several ponies were burned. Several other small fires were reported, but without any details. No cause or other circumstances were related.⁴⁸

Richards & Co.'s Unique Shows experienced a blowdown in Detroit, Texas, in July 1901. The tent was packed with the largest audience to date, but a big wind gust flattened it. Two lamps took fire, but before they could set the canvas on fire they were extinguished with two quilts, dipped in the tub of lemonade, that the quick-thinking Mrs. Richards retrieved from her sleeping wagon. Monies were refunded, but the center poles were raised again and a "blue sky" show was given to an appreciative different audience.⁴⁹

A Kansas cyclone swooped down on the Bonheur Bros.' Show at Dexter on August 30, 1902, causing extensive damage. The canvas and poles were all lifted up and tossed about over the seating and beyond. The gasoline lamps flared up and one local man badly burned his hands when he attempted to extinguish it. The rain then came down very heavy and extinguished what remained of the lamp fires before they could destroy the top.⁵⁰

A gasoline-fueled lighting accident malfunction was blamed for the destruction of the Frank A. Robbins circus big top at New Rochelle, New York, at 9:00 PM on May 11, 1906. When aerial performer Mlle. Reinal was hoisted to her elevated "Dip of Death" performing position the rope being used whacked a gasoline lamp that went crashing onto the ground. The splashing fire reached a gas storage barrel that exploded with a bright burst, spreading the blaze every-

where. "The flames shot up through the center [of the tent], burning a hole first in the top. The shooting spirals of fire could be seen a great distance, and illuminated the entire section where the circus had camped." One showman broke a leg and ten local people were seriously injured. Many rushed out, others escaped in slits cut by show attaches. "Only the cool and calm action on the part of the employees of the circus caused the spectators to escape from under the burning canvas with but slight injuries." It was one of the rare instances when both the local fire and police departments were recorded as assisting at the incident. The loss was set at just \$1,000.⁵¹

A fire was reported as damaging the Jones Enormous Shows dressing room and menagerie during an engagement at Tampa, Florida in January 1907.⁵² One end of the big top housing the Gentry Bros. No. 1 show was partially destroyed by an accident involving a lighting chandelier at Greensburg, Pennsylvania, in the fall of 1907.⁵³

The venerable John Robinson circus sustained a blow-down on October 14, 1908, trapping 3,000 people under the toppled canvas. The illumination system, lacking in description, started several fires, but they were rapidly snuffed out by show personnel.⁵⁴

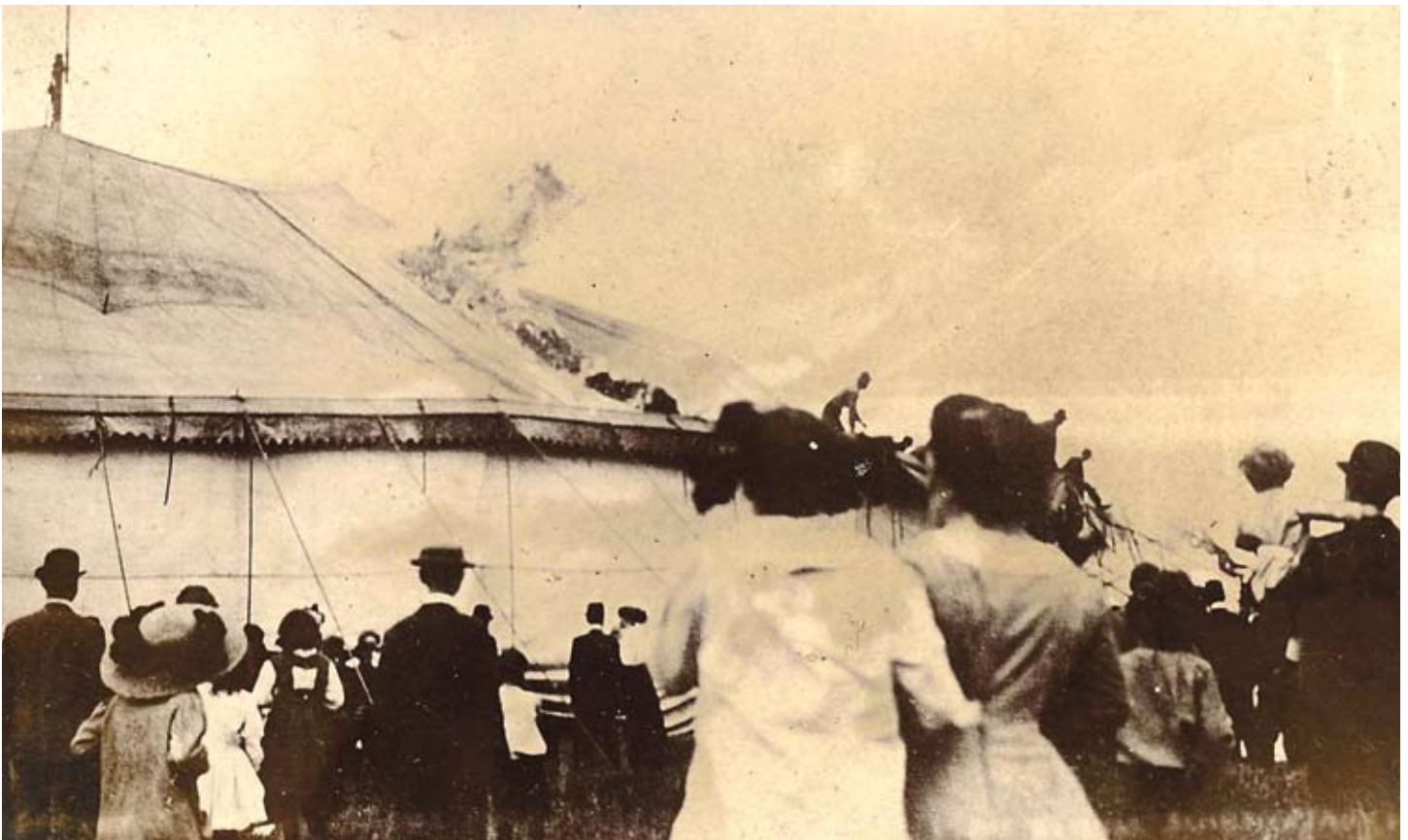
Between 1910 and 1913 the two largest Ringling-owned circuses suffered big top fires, one of them suffering a pair of losses. Two were believed to be caused by careless smok-

ers, one by airborne embers from a burning building some distance from the lot.

Barnum & Bailey, managed by Otto and John Ringling, lost its big top to a fire at Schenectady, New York on May 21, 1910. The day started badly when a factory fire at Kingston, New York delayed the loadout and departure of the show trains, causing a late arrival and cancellation of the street parade. The standard 2:00 PM matinee time passed, and it was not until at least a half hour later that the equestrian director was ready to blow his whistle to start the show for enjoyment by the twelve to fifteen thousand occupants of the big top. It was a big crowd, a straw house with people placed in front of the blues at the north end, behind which the fire started.

The big show band concert in the center ring had just ended and the whistle had not yet been blown to signal the start of the grand entry procession of the assembled cast around the hippodrome track. In that suspended state of attentive inactivity, a tenuous, murmuring quiet had descended upon the audience as minds re-focused, somewhat ritualistically, from musical enjoyment to anticipation of a spectacle of splendor.

Attempts to extinguish the small blaze from spreading to the entire top proved futile, even after canvasmen went atop the canvas with water to fight the flames. The employees re-focused their actions on assisting with crowd evacu-



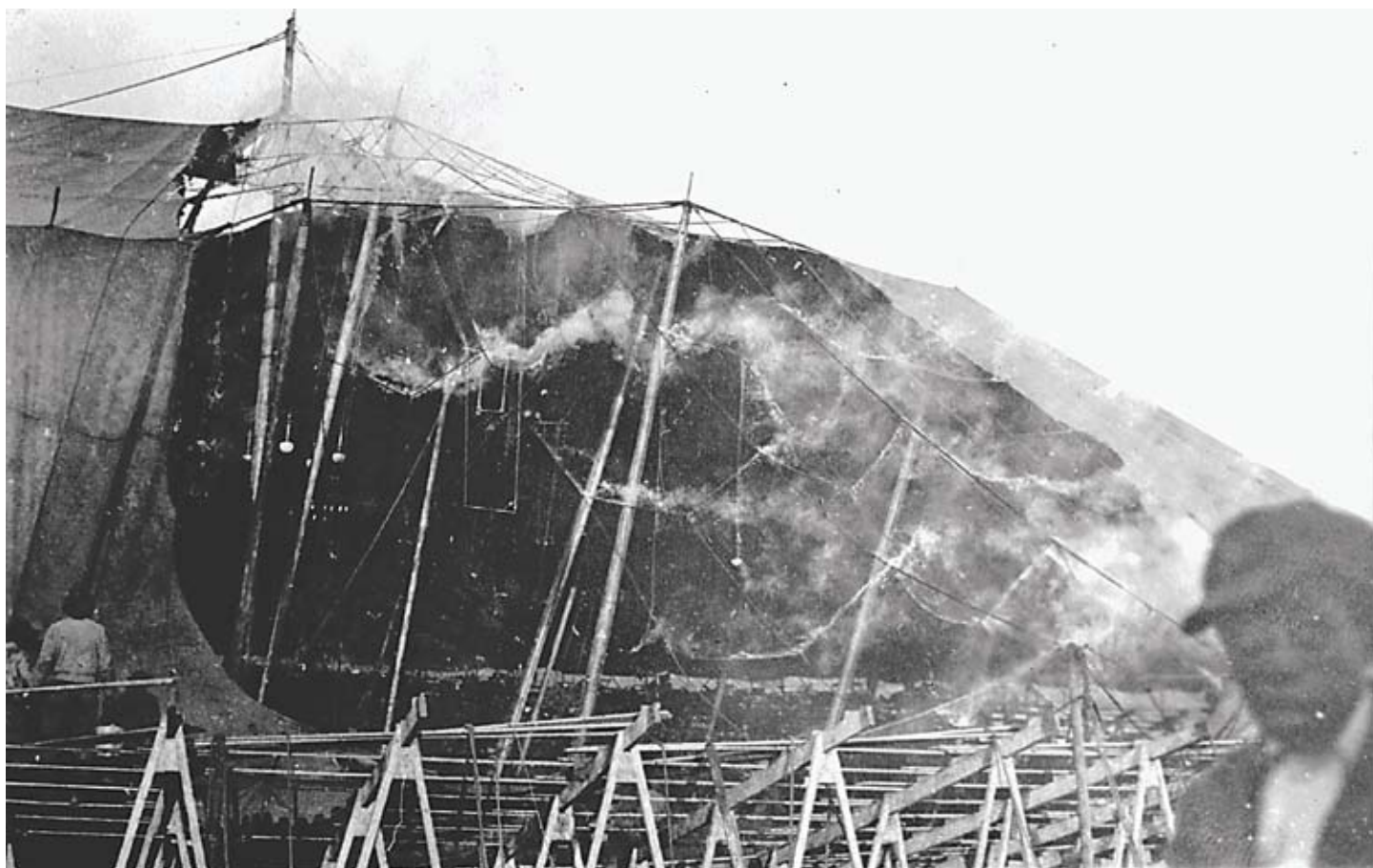
Canvasmen risked their lives going atop the burning Barnum & Bailey big top at Schenectady, New York, on May 21, 1910, to fight the flames consuming the canvas.

Circus World Museum

ation. The resultant calm resulted in no loss of life, only the destruction of the canvas and scorched seating and performance apparatus. The timing was near providential, as in the quiet before the performance started it was possible to gain the attention and cooperation of the assembly. One woman, who fell from the top of the seats, was the only injury.

Within a few seconds the fire worked its way to the peak of the tent. By that time people were filing out in an orderly fashion, but many women and children became hysterical, and only the efforts of the men prevented a disastrous stampede.

of the performance props and other equipment could be removed before they could be reached by the fire. The canvas was lost, but only light scorching was evident on poles and seating. The dressing room, where two buckets of water were typically provided to each performer, one for washing and one for rinsing, served as a principal source of water for dousing flames. Some reports declared the seats a total loss, but that does not appear to be accurate. To prevent further losses, the menagerie and other tents were dropped and all elephants, led stock and horses were taken to a nearby field and corralled. The center poles fell after the guys holding



Flames consumed the canvas, leaving behind a network of ropes. The center and quarter poles remained up until the flames had eaten away at the ropes to the point they no longer supported the poles, causing them to crash to the ground with destructive force.

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A member of the audience, a knowingly careless cigar smoker, was quickly identified as the source of the blaze.

“A careless smoker is blamed for the cause of the fire. Employees who saw him carry a lighted cigar to his seat in the top tier close to the canvas wall warned him that he must not smoke. Instead of tossing the cigar away, they believe that he hid it behind his back, and in so doing brushed the burning end against the canvas.”

The progress of the blaze was adequately slow that most

them in place burned through to the point that they lacked the requisite strength to maintain their position.⁵⁵

The Snellen-scripted account again provides insights on the unfolding disaster:

“Fire started at the back end of the big top a little to right of center. At this time I was about in the connection [path between the big top and the menagerie, defined by sidewall on both sides]. It had burned a streak about 10 feet in length when I first noticed it. Then it began to spread on all sides.

“Immediately four or five men went on top of

the tent; they used cloths, coats, jack knives and everything possible trying to prevent spreading of the fire. At one moment it seemed to be getting under control of the men and all at once the breeze seemed to fan it again and like a prairie fire it began to spread over the canvas in all directions. On account of the fact that it burned the ropes along with it, the men were unable to get close to the edge of the burning canvas.

"From the time the fire started until it had burned up to the first center pole and pretty well over the blue seats at the back end, it had taken about from five to ten minutes. It burned slower at the start than it did afterwards; the burning area was smaller on the start and it was fanned less by the wind; and in addition to that there was one time shortly after the fire started when it seemed the men had more control over the fire than after it had gotten under greater headway.

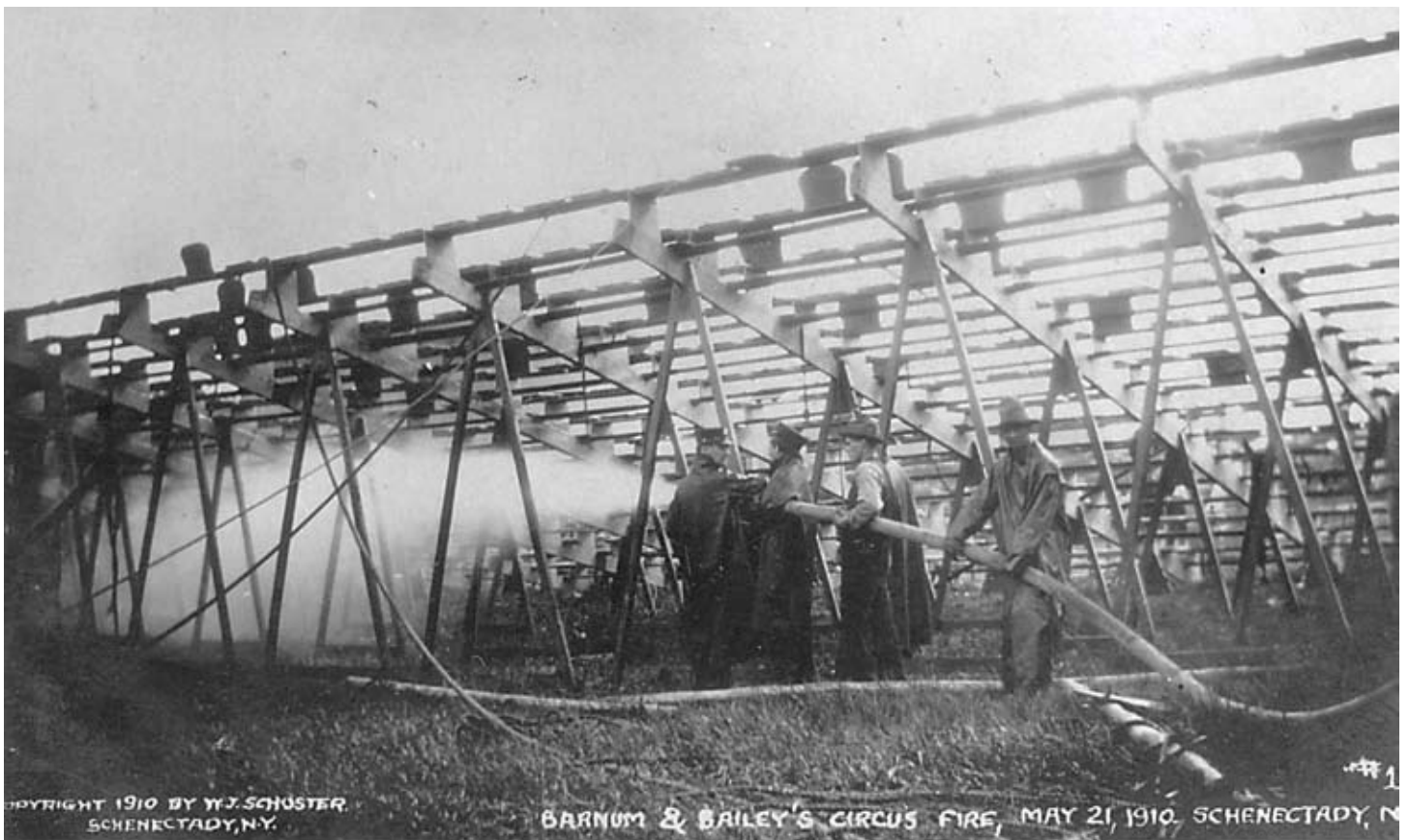
"When the fire started of course everybody in the tent saw it. Everybody looked at it. There was a hush and stillness which spread over the tent and everybody was quiet.

"When the fire started the people in the vicinity of the fire and under it got up and most of them walked out of the tent. They were going out through

regular openings and through special openings that were made. They began to walk out the way that they came in; through the connection; and the big opening was clear at the performers' entrance where they went out; and they also went out continuously under the blue seats. The whole tent, except the reserved seat sections, constituted an exit, and boys and men even dropped back behind the blue seats and went out. There was nothing to prevent people from going out anywhere around the tent.

"For the first five or ten minutes after the fire started the crowd was orderly and we did not have to tell them anything. In order to avoid a panic, we thought it best not to excite the crowd and they were going out quietly and regularly of their own choice.

"After the fire had spread to about the third center pole from the back end, the crowd began to gather throughout the center of the tent under the unburned canvas and at this time we shouted to everybody to get out of the tent. The people in the big crowd in the center of the tent, over the hippodrome track and through the rings and stages were looking at the fire burn. They were not making an effort to get out. Where the fire was burning, our men began letting down quarter poles. At this time the people were all off from the seats.



The arrival of the local fire department was usually too late to do much good beyond extinguishing the final flames or smoldering embers.

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“There had been absolutely no stampede.

“There had been absolutely no panic.

“Not only were people congregating in the center of the tent to watch the fire, but two or three times when through the work of the men on top it looked as though they had the fire under control, the people in the tent applauded.

“During all this time, from the moment when the fire started until everybody was out of the tent, every usher and gate-man stood at his post of duty until all people left their respective sections.

“As soon as the crowd began loitering and congregating in the center of the tent, then the ushers, boss canvasmen, Mr. Cook, [and] Mr. Shipp (Equestrian Director) advised and shouted at the people to leave the tent. They were hanging back so that they interfered with the work of the men in handling poles and controlling the fire. They had to be forced back by our employees, and even then they went out of the tent with their heads twisted, looking back at the fire in large numbers.

“At no time was there anything like a panic.

“At no time did the people rush or jam or crowd in getting out of the tent at any place.

“The advance of the fire was so slow that everybody took plenty of time in getting away from that

section, and did get away before the fire had spread 20 feet in length and three or four feet at the bottom. The ropes of course held longer than the canvas and seemed to retard spreading the flames.”

Snellen’s account contains one observation that may not be true, depending upon how exacting one interprets it. He observed “The Ringling Brothers up to that time had never had a canvas fire on any tent.” The last two words were underlined. Accepted at face value, the statement is untrue, there having been two fires, in 1895 and 1901, as related above. If one allows Snellen to mean the consumption of a big top, it is true. Snellen was the Ringling tent boss from 1891 to 1907.

The experienced boss canvasman also declared:

“There was never occasion for carrying liquid fire extinguishers. Their [the Ringlings] whole tent was an opening, and the construction of the tent was sufficient to let any crowd out at any time.”

In hindsight, and with the awareness and sensitivities of today, the statement seems callous and incredulous. Yet, in the many years of circus tent use there had been no demonstrated need for having fire prevention apparatus as part of the show and no lives had been lost. One can cite the pe-



Ringling-owned and managed shows seldom placed loads on wagon sides while in transit, suggesting that the hundreds of buckets on this baggage wagon may have served a special purpose on the lot, beyond the usual daily wash and rinse water in the wardrobe top.

Author’s collection

riod absence of sprinkler systems and fire escape provisions in taller city structures and other lapses in design and prevention that were only rectified through further loss of life and injuries. His assertion that the entire tent was an exit is somewhat true – but – it relied upon occupants to know where to exit or to navigate the awkward path through erected seating to reach a gap under the sidewall, which indeed made it possible to exit the top almost everywhere along the periphery.

In his inserted remarks, John M. Kelley emphasized the absence of an out of control mob madly seeking to exit the big top. He noted, surprisingly, “We carried no fire extinguishing apparatus.” He apparently meant that there were no show-owned fire-fighting vehicles, fire extinguishers or other related apparatus carried with the circus. The Ringling brothers were later sued for negligence in not having hand-operated, liquid-filled fire extinguishers on the lot at the time of the fire. The case of *Griswold v. Ringling et al* was appealed and went through a reversal. The ultimate outcome is unknown. The Snellen statement quoted herein may have been compiled for use in one aspect of this lawsuit.⁵⁶

The water buckets, mentioned by Snellen, presumably had alternative purposes other than being at the ready at performance times. A pair of photos exists showing a Barnum & Bailey baggage wagon of the late 1900 to 1910 period loaded with hundreds of water buckets on the outside. The Ringlings almost always, as practice, kept the sides of their baggage wagons free from loads, preferring to have everything inside the box bodies so that the show title could be seen and also to prevent loss by theft or other incidents, like rough riding on the train or extrication from a muddy lot. A Barnum & Bailey loading order list a stable wagon loaded with buckets and perhaps they play into the story.

Kelley, who was probably not at Schenectady, also observed:

“Immediately, when the fire started, Mr. Cook directed an employee to notify an officer to turn in an alarm. The fire alarm was turned in, and they appeared on the ground when the fire had progressed to the point near the last center pole. As the fire burned, the quarter poles were let down.”

The collapsing of the center poles was the final act of existence of the few

weeks-old big top. Boss canvasmen, proprietors and other learned from the 1910 fire. The challenge was that an incident where the knowledge could be applied were – very thankfully – few and far between. There is some indication of the acquisition of fire-fighting apparatus by at least one circus and the use of lowering poles to fight a fire at ground level in another.

The foregoing interpretation, largely giving the show’s perspective, stands in glaring contrast to period news accounts of the same incident. The amusement trade journal *Clipper* offered a synopsis:

“The tent was crowded, but through the coolness of the management and employees, the crowd filed out quickly, and not a person was hurt. Of course many false reports were published in many papers.”⁵⁷

The second Ringling big top fire of the 1910s hit the circus bearing their family name at Sterling, Illinois, on August 22, 1912. A fairground barn fire some three blocks from the show lot started about 1:00 PM. The crowd was already gathering on the lot with tickets in hand. Al Ringling, in charge on the lot, prevented all ticket holders from entering the menagerie and big top, where the show was slated to start at 2:00 PM. Eventually a burning shingle, lifted by the heated air from the barn conflagration alighted on the big top. Within a brief period it was entirely consumed. The show reportedly took a loss of \$18,000 on the day, which included the loss of spectacle scenery and performance properties and refunded tickets.⁵⁸

Animals were removed from their tents, which were dropped to prevent their catching fire while in the air. The action left the performers in a state of great uncertainty.

Form 165

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THEO. N. VAIL, PRESIDENT BELVIDERE BROOKS, GENERAL MANAGER

RECEIVED AT BARABOO, WIS. 14 CH 9
Sterling, Ills 8/22/12
Mrs Mary Edwards
311-3rd st
Baraboo, Wis
Big show in fire all saved dont be afraid
Katherine
2:55pm

News of the Ringling big top fire at Sterling, Illinois, spread fast; this telegram, posted about an hour after the flames were detected, assured the folks back in Baraboo that all was well with their loved ones.

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Women and children in white spangled tights and a Japanese troupe dressed in fine kimonos sat mute in a space dotted by wardrobe trunks that had once been covered by a tent where they had changed from street clothes to performance wardrobe.

“The experience was one that few have been called upon to face. These people faced it bravely. After the crisis had passed – after everything was over and the nerve tension had relaxed, they broke down. The men, however, were given no opportunity to sit down. Performers worked alongside the grimy canvasmen until order was restored out of chaos.”⁵⁹

The loss of a big top on both huge Ringling-owned shows, Barnum & Bailey in 1910 and Ringling in 1912, surely caused the brothers and their top notch boss canvasmen to re-think and re-focus on fire prevention measures, and likely fire-fighting activity. Snellen’s prepared remarks suggest how workingmen were deployed and seemingly points to keeping the flaming canvas aloft, to lessen damage to the seating. A fire in 1913 points to a change in thinking and fighting the fire – perhaps – on the ground.

It was towards the end of the matinee, right before the hippodrome races were to start, that fire was noticed in the Barnum & Bailey seven-pole big top at Columbus, Georgia, on Saturday, October 25, 1913. The usual six-pole top, covering three rings and two stages, was expanded with an additional middle piece to handle the anticipated crowds. Thrilling was a word often invoked to describe the fast-paced chariot contests around the track, but before they got underway, a different emotion, panic, took hold in the audience. What were described as cooler heads, hundreds of them including police, officials and leading citizens, tried to maintain a calm presence amidst the seven to ten thousand member audience, but soon it was a chaotic presence, with one person leaping over another, causing children to be separated from parents, sprains and bruises. Some went out via exits, others simply went under a lifted sidewall canvas. There were no major injuries, but in their haste to escape many had abandoned their coats and other belongings. Children and wraps were later reunited when order prevailed again. Those that charged out via the connection and the menagerie top caused alarm in the picketed animals, including the elephants and a zebra.

It was reported that the fire was initiated in the sidewall canvas at the back of the segregated tent, meaning at the far end, the blues, where African Americans were confined by the racist attitudes that prevailed. A young man was mentioned as having delayed lighting up his cigarette when the first race started, the lit match being held too close to the canvas and starting it afire. Another report mentioned a carelessly lit cigar, tossed aside. These observations were not

official and show personnel declined to provide any sort of formal statement as to the cause.

Fighting a canvas that was up to 50 feet in the air, as was the case in 1910, was almost impossible and at best very risky to workers. Perhaps by pre-planning, the 1913 fire progress was stunted when the standing top was brought down to the ground by lowering poles and perhaps the bale rings at the center poles. Specific details of the process were not related. Canvasmen and others had a chance to extinguish a blaze at ground level and that is exactly what they did. Half of the canvas was saved and poles and seating were not damaged. To what degree any canvas treatment, weather conditions or other factors may have played a role in minimizing the damage are unknown. The only remnant of knowledge is the action taken to lower the top to a position of gaining control over the blaze.

The mass of humanity delayed the local fire fighters from being able to expeditiously reach the scene. The distance to the closest hydrants also caused a problem. Despite the delay, the show praised the local fire fighters effort. Fire-fighting apparatus was employed in the effort, though the show’s own “chemical tank” unit failed to work when brought forward for use. The 46-gallon chemical tanks on big internal-combustion-powered fire engines were put to use, along with 200 feet of chemical hose, and ten hand fire extinguishers were required to put out the fire. It was the first time that a giant big show canvas had been spared from total destruction.

The night show was cancelled and all ticket monies refunded. The past year’s big top, carried for such emergencies, was used to finish the tour. The loss was set at \$1,000 and the lost revenues. To what degree the saving of the tent was due to an applied plan of action is unclear. It is possible that vigilance against smoking was re-doubled and that shows believed that they had a means to fight fire in a standing top.⁶⁰

There was not another big top fire for 31 seasons.

The fourth and last Ringling-owned show tent fire of the 1910 decade transpired on October 28, 1916, at Huntsville, Alabama, destroying a horse tent. The numbers of horses killed outright, and those that had to be put down owing to their injuries, varied in newspaper accounts from 40 to 50. A total of 90 replacement baggage stock was stated in one report. Initial reports gave no cause for the fire, but an insurance trade journal gave it as a cigarette. The loss reports also varied at \$15,000 to \$25,000.⁶¹

The only major menagerie fire in American circus history decimated the traveling zoo with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey at Cleveland, Ohio, on August 4, 1942. Menageries, like horse tops, were often filled with combustible materials. The profusion of keepers, posted near their charges during public hours, as well as before and after, usually provided numerous observant eyes to watch for any telltale signs of fire. When the Cleveland fire started, about



During a nearby building fire in 1933, precautionary measures were taken by Ringling-Barnum men atop the big top. Other circumstances of the event, and especially the source of the water conveyed into the hose, are unknown.

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two hours before the start of the matinee, the elephant men and cage attendants were at lunch in the dining top. Over 40 animals were lost in the disaster, which cost the circus an estimated \$200,000 loss. The 120-foot wide by 320-foot long six-pole top was completely destroyed, and a number of cage wagons were extensively damaged. The blaze was intentionally caused by a discharged employee, who threw a lit cigarette into some hay, a retaliatory action taken against his firing. He would have known the opportune time at which to initiate a blaze. The 1941 menagerie top was shipped up from Sarasota, the animals and cages being under the open sky until it arrived, starting with the night show on the 4th.⁶²

The arsonist was initially identified as a 16-year old, Lemandria Ford, a resident of Hazelwood, a Pittsburgh suburb. He and his miscreant companion, named as Jess Johnson, were said by a news account to have been employed at Pittsburgh on July 26, a Sunday, the day before the engagement that ran from the 27th to the 1st of August. Ford and his friend were absent from work on the morning of Monday, August 3, before the fire, and then paid off afterwards, before he was identified as the arsonist. Ford and his friend blew town, but

were captured riding a freight train at Duquesne, just south of Pittsburgh.⁶³

The official Ringling-Barnum employment card records Lemandris Ford was born on October 23, 1923, making him almost 19. He was formally listed as being hired on Saturday, August 1, and terminated the following day.⁶⁴

Circus officials, mental health personnel and police had mixed opinions of the guilt of both men, despite evidence of Ford's employment in the form of menagerie meal tickets. His initial confession was later recanted and he pointed to Johnson as having forced him at knife point to drop his lit cigarette into some hay. No one was ever held accountable for the fire.⁶⁵

On July 6, 1944, at Hartford, Connecticut, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows big top was entirely destroyed by fire, with additional damage to seats, poles and props. No cause was ever determined. One hundred sixty-eight lives were lost, 487 were injured. The circus closed temporarily and reopened later playing outdoors, without a top.

There has been no significant circus tent fire in the United States subsequent to the Hartford tragedy.

Disaster Response Music

Keeping the audience focused on the ring show – watching the performance action and listening to the accompanying band music, the *raison d'être* for their presence – seems to have been a commonly-employed technique for maintaining order in the big top during the onset of disasters, whether caused by stormy weather, tent fires or other agency. In the case of a storm, it drew attention away from what they could not readily see, but could hear and somewhat “feel.” A fire was more visceral, before the eyes.

Episodes cited above, from 1870, 1895 and 1905, confirm what many others knew in different walks of life. As author William Congreve is incorrectly quoted as having written in 1697, “Music hath charms to soothe a savage beast.” [Congreve actually wrote “Musick has Charms to soothe a Savage Breast, play Mourning Bride To soften Rocks, or bend a knotted Oak.”] The continued playing of the circus band could calm a panicking crowd and keep them in their seats when they were close to bolting and causing a stampede.

On the opposite hand, there's truth to “silence is golden.” The 1910 Barnum & Bailey fire happened during the anticipatory-tense time between the conclusion of the center ring concert and the grand entry. In taking command of the evolving situation, boss canvasman Jack Snellen and equestrian director Ed Shipp decided to extend the silence. Shipp managed the performance in the big top and played as important a role as Snellen in deciding what to do – or not to do. There may have been consideration to instruct the big show bandleader, to start to play, but their decision went in a different direction. Continuation of the silence provided them with a means to communicate orally to the crowd, even if by leather-lunged shouting. Their verbal commands would not have to compete with the sound emanating from the band.

Whether the performance was underway or was not, the wise choice was likely to continue whatever was happening in the beginning moments of an incident. In 1870, 1895 and 1905, the show was on and the music was playing; in 1910 it was the gentle murmuring of the crowd. By choice, the “normal” audio experience was continued, rather than to interrupt it and change the status quo. The universally feared shout of “fire” shatters the peaceful continuum of the mind and thereby pandemonium often breaks out. Cessation of music and ring action similarly interrupts focused concentration and allows fear to gain access and to seize the mind.

The one variant seems to have been for the band to have shifted from the medley of tunes arranged as the program music to either a faster tempo tune, such as a march, or to familiar popular music of the day. The technique was intended to re-gain the crowd's attention by engaging minds that had been given an alternative – a thunderclap, a lightning bolt, a shriek, or a wisp of flame or smoke – and to break that

temporary focus and return it to something aligned with the ring show. No evidence has been discovered that any traveling tent circus formulated comprehensive disaster preparedness plans to guide department heads and employees in how to address dangerous incidents as they unfolded. The general thought was that the proprietor (if on site) guided, or delegated and generally relied upon the department heads, who had large numbers of workingmen on call and would direct their efforts to perform whatever duties were necessary to confront the adversity being faced at the moment.

They would probably have argued that no one plan fit all circumstances. Challenges could come from the sky, performers, animals, audience members and technological failures, or a combination of several sources. No one plan fit all and could effectively cover the entire foot print of a huge big top, or the entire circus lot. Further, the high turnover rate of workingmen throughout the season negatively impacted the effectiveness of preparatory practices, such as fire drills.

The origin and development of circus disaster music has never been investigated. Even after recent and considerable searching, this effort to document the origin and evolution of “The Disaster March” is hardly authoritative. Surviving corporate papers are limited and not always accessible and what happened during disasters was often lost in the aftermath. Attention was given to the injured and bereaved, as well as to making repairs so that “the show can go on.” There are still photos and textual reports and memoirs, but no real-time audio or film records to examine until 1944. Principal questions have no hard answers and different conclusions can be drawn from the remaining record.

Before The Disaster March – “The Tournament”

Although blowdowns were typically experienced in the tornado-prone Midwest, Great Plains, and the South, one of the worst episodes took place without warning on the Ringling-owned and operated Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. circus when it was playing in the midst of New York City. The show was erected on Manhattan Field, at 155th Street and Eighth Avenue, when an extremely bad weather episode hit on August 18, 1910, at the end of a week-long engagement.

A freak storm, likened to a Midwestern tornado by Al. Ringling, the brother in charge on the lot, materialized without warning at 4:00 P.M., towards the end of the matinee. It tore 16 ribs in the top, snapping six quarter poles and flooding the area with a foot of water. The center poles stood fast, sustaining the canvas top aloft and thereby limiting the human injuries to one or two women who were struck by the smaller poles. Today, the weather incident might be termed a “downdraft” or a “downburst.”

As the storm pounced on the show, Ringling sprinted to



The aftermath of the Forepaugh-Sells blowdown in the heart of New York City on April 18, 1910 was a thoroughly soaked lot and a badly damaged big top.

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the bandstand, commanding bandmaster Joseph John Richards, familiarly known as “Joe,” “Johnny” or “J. J.,” to “strike up his liveliest tune.” Richards selected “The Tournament,” which he termed the liveliest march ever written, leading his band in playing it repeatedly in an effort to buoy patron and employee spirits, keeping their minds active and focused until the danger had dissipated. They played it until the storm ended. The novelty of his action caught the ear of a reporter, which is how Richard’s choice entered the record.

Al. Ringling rapidly organized the canvasmen and ticket sellers, effectively guiding half the crowd of 4,000 outside, preventing a stampede that could have caused loss of life or injury. Fifty lost children were gathered into a small tent, supplied with popcorn and other treats until they were all reunited with their adult companions within a half-hour. It was a quick-thinking and appropriate response to the unan-

ticipated storm, an action one would expect from the highly regarded Al. Ringling, whose specialty had always been performance management. With complete confidence in Richards, he let the musician pick the tune and left to lead other rescue efforts.

To the best of our knowledge, it was the first time that a big show bandleader chose and then caused the band under his direction to play a specially-selected tune to musically quell the fears of the crowd – and for which there is documentation for the tune chosen. Richards likely chose it instinctively. Presumably, it was one known from memory, by himself and also his band members, who jumped into it from whatever they had been playing.

Welsh-born Richards was a circus windjammer by 1896, when he played in the Forepaugh-Sells parade drum corps. He was a cornet player on Forepaugh-Sells in 1906, moved

over to Barnum & Bailey for 1908, and in 1910 was hired to lead the Forepaugh-Sells band. The Ringlings liked his style and shifted him to their namesake show where he led the band through 1918.⁶⁶ Works by Richards were copyrighted and published as early as 1910, by Barnhouse and Willis, but

The earliest known possibility is a composition by Louis Moreau Gottschalk. The piece, known early as “Gran gallop de bravura,” received a debut by Gottschalk on December 13 and 15, 1851, in the Coliseo del Circo, a former circus building, on the Plaza del Rey in Madrid, Spain. It was pub-



Bandleader J. J. Richards and his band presented a center ring concert before every performance, and then after disaster struck made circus history with the playing of a specially selected tune, perhaps for the first time.

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the bulk of his compositions date after his circus work.

The immediate question is which of several tunes titled “The Tournament” did Richards instruct his band to play? Among almost ten or so compositions of that title, or a variation of it, several stand out as the best candidates. Others were overtures or issued after 1910 and were thereby eliminated from consideration.

There are limits to what the textual reference can divulge when being read over a century later. One should bear in mind that the tune may have been cited in a vernacular manner by Richards to the reporter, who formalized it; it could have been a piece used in the grand entry, which was called a “tournament” in circus vocabulary. Or, perhaps, Richards, a musician’s musician, may have felt that simply saying “The Tournament” was so authoritative that no further clarification was necessary, the tune being well-known in his mind.

lished later as “The Tournament Gallop” and is still played today, recorded versions being accessible online. It was often slated as the last tune of a program, to close it with a rousing flourish. For that reason it was kept alive, as a catchy “barn burner.” It is the sort of piece that an experienced bandleader like Richards may have had in his band practice repertoire, a “just in case” sort of composition.⁶⁷

Going against the Gottschalk nomination is the fact that not a single tune by him was a known part of the period circus repertoire. “Classical music,” as well as European and American salon, ballroom and dance music of the mid-19th century was part of circus presentations in the period it was issued, and thereafter, but lessened in frequency of use as popular music and specially-composed circus tunes became more readily available. No copies of it are filed in later circus bandleader music libraries and it was not among selections listed for playing in pre-show big band concerts, as deter-

mined by an examination of listings in show programs during Richards' tenure.

Another possibility is circus windjammer and composer A. W. Hughes's "The Tournament," a hand-written scribed copy of which, perhaps the original, is in his preserved papers.⁶⁸ It was copyrighted in 1894 by Whaley Royce, marking it as his oldest dated piece of work. It is barely known today. Many of his works were published under pseudonyms and are perhaps credited to others.⁶⁹

Bandmaster and brass instrument teacher. A. F. Weldon is credited with a piece titled "The Tournament" that was published by Dubois in 1896. No copy of it could be found and consultation with circus band music experts brought forth no knowledge of the piece. It seems to have disappeared, perhaps suggesting that it was not popular or widely available. Weldon's rather well-known "Gate City March," a medley of well-known melodies, is still included in band repertoires, with several others on older recordings, and another included on a Wurlitzer band organ roll. The scarcity seems to limit the prospect that it was chosen by Richards. Richards studied cornet with the bandmaster in the winter of 1905 and may have learned of Weldon's "The Tournament".



This handwritten music by A. W. Hughes, reportedly published in 1894, may have been an entirely new composition titled "The Tournament," or could have been a piece of existing music arranged for a show grand entry, which was also known as a "tournament" to some.

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Noted composer Harry J. Lincoln composed a piece named "The Tournament" march and two-step, arranged by F. H. Losey and issued in 1907. It remains in print (BO-VACO) and can be purchased today (C. L. Barnhouse Co.). Additional Lincoln works remain in print and others were arranged for band organ rolls. Just a few years old at the time of the incident, along with the continued availability today, seems to give some favor to it being used in 1910.⁷⁰

Exactly which "Tournament" piece Richards selected may never be determined with certainty. It must have been a piece that the bandsmen knew, from memory, something to which Richards could quickly segue and perhaps accelerate in tempo, in accordance with Al. Ringling's instruction.

The last Barnum & Bailey blowdown

The final blowdown to strike Barnum & Bailey took place at Uniontown, Pennsylvania, on June 1, 1917, as related previously. Had the show not been late in arriving from the prior blowdown engagement, the second would not have transpired because the matinee would have been completed by the time the storm struck. The legendary Karl L. King was leading the band when what was thought to be a tornado hit the tent. A tertiary account credits King with calming the crowd, but no mention was made of special music being played.

"This storm blew down a section of the main tent, killing two people and injuring others. Fortunately, the section not destroyed by the storm was the location of the band. During this terrifying event, the director, Karl King, kept the band playing continually until all the injured and spectators were evacuated from the tent. It was stated the band music kept the capacity crowd from becoming panic stricken and fleeing in terror."⁷¹

Coverage of the event in *New York Clipper* and available newspapers make no specific mention of any action taken by King or the band. The episode does not appear in a biography of King published years later. The *Billboard* reported that the band was playing music for the spectacle, when winds toppled the top.⁷²

Prelude to 1944

The incomparable Merle Evans is at the heart of The Disaster March story, yet an episode less than a decade earlier had him playing different music when confronted with a blowdown. Being Kansas-born, twisters were nothing new when he took over the baton of the Greatest Show on Earth big show band for 1919. Fortunately, it appears that he faced only one storm incident in his more than three decades under the Ringling-Barnum big top.

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus (the title during the Gumpertz-managed years) played a two-day engagement at Washington, D. C., on May 18 and 19, 1936. A local newspaper lauded his leadership and the band's heroism in maintaining order as the disaster became evident – when the winds first ripped holes in the top on the first day of the stand.

“At this point, the circus band started its appeal to reason. It played on and on in the midst of the madhouse setting. One close enough could see a mother and her child, both with broken bones, being carried away from their crumpled seats to the accompaniment of a number in march tempo from the musicians platform.

“On and on the band played and suddenly there was a noticeable about-face from the moving crowd as the first retreaters began to come slowly back.

“This stunt seemed to settle the issue between hysteria and cool thinking. The siren of a departing ambulance was drowned out in an ear-thumping drum-beat from the band.”⁷³

More detail was given in the May 1936 issue (page 3) of *Greater Show World* concerning the band's response to the blowdown. The article heading was: “Merle Evans Stands Out In An Emergency.”

“While exhibiting here, today, the Ringling-Barnum Circus, during the matinee was amid an electrical windstorm that ripped the brand new big show top and a panic was avoided when Merle Evans, Band-leader with the ‘Greatest Show on Earth’ taking the situation in at a glance, hastened his band boys onto the center stage, and started in playing swing popular music. This action on the part of Evans, avoided what might have been a panic among the ten thousand or more people seated beneath the big top.

“During the storm a small pole struck Betty Randebusch, 13 of Shenandoah, Pa., who was rushed to Georgetown Hospital at Washington, D.C. While the Merle Evans musicians calmed the patrons, animal trainers rushed the 42 bulls into the rain where

they became quiet. The big top was repaired following the matinee and the show went on as usual for the night performance.”

The coverage is ambiguous in three ways and leaves one wondering what really happened.

First, were there two different crowd-calming actions undertaken by the band? The reports describe two seemingly-different presentations. It may be a case of a single incident observed in substantially different ways.

Second, did the Evans band play an actual march, or another piece in march-time? Did Evans call for Sousa's famous “Stars and Stripes” march at this time? Nowhere was “The Disaster March” mentioned in coverage. In continuing his crowd management, Evans wisely chose music, a medley of tunes, which he felt would engender an immediate calming effect on the audience to reduce their collective anxieties – swing popular music” – likely meaning popular dance music. He did that because the show was continuing.

Evans and all other big show bandleaders were accustomed to playing many different tunes to accompany the ring performance, with dozens and dozens of cues and changes. In that regard, a series of always changing tunes was normal to circus audience ears. Extended and full-length pieces were for the pre-show center ring concert, where the depth and breadth of their musicianship was ably demonstrated.

Third, did Evans simply take charge of the situation from the bandstand, or did he actually lead his band from that location to a central tent position, one of the two stages interspersed between the three rings? There was a ring in the center, not a stage, but a reporter's viewing angle may have caused confusion. It would seem that the band remained in their place, lest their walking away suggested a mass Pied Piper departure to the crowd.

What was not stated in 1936 was that one of the tent poles toppled onto the bandstand, just as a center pole would later, in 1944, causing the bandmen to flee for their own safety. Damaged in the collapse was the special 49-whistle Pneumatic brand air calliope made in 1914, by special order for Barnum & Bailey bandleader Ned Brill. It was returned to the maker for repairs and served the band until replaced by a Hammond organ a few years later. The replacement whistles, of a later design, remain as evidence of the 1936 storm damage.⁷⁴

“The Disaster March”

The foregoing presentation provides a background and context for examining the legend of “Stars and Stripes Forever” being the traditional circus disaster music signal, “The Disaster March.” A circus band playing a rousing version of John Philip Sousa's familiar and acclaimed tune to signal a big top disaster transcends circus history and is embedded in popular public knowledge of ring shows. A recent reference to the practice is found in a published account of the



Merle Evans had led the Ringling-Barnum band since 1919 and was on the bandstand seen here in 1943, when disaster struck at Hartford in 1944.

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renowned Boston Pops orchestra, providing musical accompaniment to an array of circus artists, in Symphony Hall, Boston, Massachusetts, in spring 2014.⁷⁵

Yet, the foregoing investigation of circus big top disasters and the role played by the big show bands revealed no specific disaster music selected in advance for use at the time of danger. In the one instance when a specific tune was played, as directed by a show proprietor, it was a spirited piece that the bandleader instinctively chose at the spur of a moment.

During the horrifying 1944 Hartford catastrophe, bandleader Merle Evans was one of the first circus employees to realize the tent was on fire. The music podium had been his since 1919, but never had he faced a calamity like the one that he now recognized was upon the circus.

Evans had cued the band for the heart-stopping Great Wallendas high wire act when he spotted the fire at the far west end of the big top. His vantage point was from the east end of the tent, as far from the initial fire as one could be. It was providential, as it enabled the band to stick to their position as long as possible. As it was related in his biography:

“Without turning, Merle signaled his bandsmen for a quick switch and shouted, ‘Disaster march! Hit it hard!’ The band broke into ‘Stars and Stripes Forever.’”⁷⁶

Evans’s choice caused reporters and subsequent writers to seize on the tune as being the *traditional* one to signal disaster under the big top, yet we have not discovered any justification for the claim, or prior intentional circus use of the tune. Examination of Ringling-Barnum circus concert programs disclosed but a single Sousa arrangement used in pre-show band concerts, and it was not one of his memorable compositions, but a medley of popular music.

There’s no indication that Evans, any other circus bandleader, a member of circus management or any proprietor pre-selected the tune as a generic indicator of pending tragedy. It is only by the wording of the 1971 account that one can conclude it had been specified in advance, presumably by Evans. Had the 1936 blowdown caused discussion about disaster preparedness? There’s no confirmation in available documentation

There is absolutely no disputing the fact that Evans knew the tune, as did every circus bandsman worth their wind. At Tampa, Florida, on March 19, 1942, just two years prior to the Hartford incident, Evans led the Sunshine City band in a concert that specifically cited the famous Sousa tune as being included in the program.⁷⁷

Confusion marred some of the initial post-catastrophe reporting. Evans was misidentified in one national account, the reporter’s source perhaps being cited in error.

“Even the bandstand, at the eastern or far end of the main entrance, directly opposite the point where the fire started – a full 500 feet away – was burned to cinders. The electric organ, the kettle drums, the platform itself – these were charred inches deep.

“The band, led by Pete Heaton, the organist, lived up to stage and circus tradition. The men kept blasting – that’s the circus term for playing at top volume – until the last of six great center poles toppled, and the last section of burning top with it.

“The band got away, faces blackened and uniforms scorched.”⁷⁸

Another account titled “Soothing Music” provided the proper identification of the bandleader, but induced some doubt as to the music selected by Evans. This definition of “The Disaster March” hardly fits the Sousa tune.

“When Merle Evans, the circus bandmaster, kept his musicians playing while flames licked the ‘Big Top’ yesterday, no one remembered what tunes he called for but the title, just the same, was *The Disaster March*. [original italics]

“That is the traditional name for light, soothing music – any medley played continuously – to try and ease tension in an emergency and prevent panic.

“The heat finally drove the musicians out, but Evans reassembled those who had saved their instruments and they kept on playing.”⁷⁹

Another account also mentioned “the disaster march of the canvas world,” but did not specifically name it.⁸⁰ Expanding in that direction was other coverage that points away from exclusively being the Sousa piece.

“The band played the traditional music of the circus in time of peril, ‘Disaster March,’ today as the main tent of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey circus caught afire.

“Although having a definite name, the march is not any particular music. It can be strung together from any number of compositions light and tinkling in nature, but loud enough to be heard throughout the arena. The march is intended to soothe the audience and avert panic.”⁸¹

In contrast to what might be termed a “generic” disaster march music medley are two accounts from the city in which the fire took place. They do specify what Evans chose to play. The first item was titled “Band played march at start of emergency.”

“When the word ‘fire’ reached the bandstand at the circus fire Thursday, the 29-piece brass band under the direction of Merle Evans, bandleader, immediately changed over from the music of the act into a march, a customary procedure by all bands during time of peril.

“Because it is a popular number, Mr. Evans led his musicians into ‘Stars and Stripes Forever,’ familiar patriotic air written by John Philip Sousa. The march could have been any tune, the circus bandmaster explained, its chief purpose being to calm the audience and avert panic. The band continued to play until the big top became a mass of flames and then filed outside where they resumed the tune.”⁸²

The most authoritative confirming account of exactly what was played is perhaps the letter sent by H. Andrews of Glastonbury, Connecticut, to the *Hartford Courant*, which published it on July 8, 1944.



John Philip Sousa’s famous march, “The Stars and Stripes Forever,” has become legendary for being the long-time circus disaster signal music, but there is a different story to be told about it and other specially played disaster music.

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The big show band was at one end of the 1944 big top, between the entry and exit doors, the spot from which Merle Evans, standing at the left corner and watching the ring action, first spotted flames at the opposite end of the canvas structure.

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The aftermath of the 1944 fire verified that a quarter pole had fallen directly onto the bandstand. The charred Hammond organ is at the top, the kettle drum shells beside it, along with folding chairs once occupied by the musicians.

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Epilogue

"I think that a lot of credit is due Merle Evans and the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey band for preventing a greater panic than there was at the circus fire. When my small son and I went out of the tent, more than one-third of it was afire.

"But the band was still playing 'The Stars and Stripes Forever.' Being a musician myself, I can appreciate how difficult it was to keep on playing under those conditions."

How long did the band continue to play at their bandstand? One report related "It wasn't until the experienced circus bandsmen saw guide ropes burning and a main tent pole swaying toward them that they jumped to the ground."⁸³ In a statement circulated on July 8, 1944, by the Associated Press, Evans declared that "we swung into 'Stars and Stripes Forever,' and we kept playing until the flames were 60 feet from the bandstand. Then we moved down beside the bandstand and kept playing until we marched outside." They stood their ground until the fire had reached past the last center pole and was eating away at the round end of the top.

Did Evans lead the band in Stars and Stripes Forever, and follow through with a medley of soothing tunes, or did he repeat the famous march over and over? Andrews was out of the tent before the band quit playing and mentioned only the march.

When, how and by whom did the Sousa tune get selected and designated as "The Disaster March"? Did Evans pick it subsequent to the 1936 blowdown, or did he signal it by his own discretion at that moment, quickly picking it out as Richards had chosen "The Tournament"? The available documentation does not provide clear answers.

In a very private moment with kindred circus veterans several decades later, circus employee and chronicler Kenny Dodd asked Evans if he played "Stars and Stripes Forever." The legendary bandmaster reportedly declared: "Hell no! We got the hell out of there."⁸⁴ Exactly how one should interpret this private, off-the-cuff remark is impossible to know.

"The Disaster March."

It was the way to tell the story in war-time America.

It was portrayed as a heroic action, a call to arms.

It was characterized as a plan for preparedness.

It was described as a long-time tradition, relied upon again, and universally.

It was meant to protect and save lives in the face of inconceivable and overwhelming disaster.

It resonated across the land, a beacon amidst the dark grief of the fire.

It became a legend.

Ringling-Barnum continued through 1956, the final season under canvas, plagued by changed management, union challenges and rising expenses. It struggled to exist in a world that had changed dramatically after the war, mobilized by automobiles, entertained by television and sustained by relative prosperity for the first time in decades.

Like a final blow, a storm with 70-mile per hour winds destroyed the big top at Geneva, New York, during the night show on July 1. Show manager Lloyd Morgan and Police Chief Joe McDonald were in conversation about what to do and had decided to stop the show when the tent started to rip at 8:25 P.M. Only 600 were in the entire expanse that was rated to hold 9,856 people. They were concentrated under the canvas that ripped open and then collapsed on them. About 20 were injured.

The circus played "blue sky" until the 1955 top arrived from the Sarasota winter quarters, finishing the truncated tour under the old top. It was an end event numbered in days. One Geneva boy stated "This is the last one of these I ever go to!" Little did he know prophesy was embedded in those words.

No mention was made of the band, or music, other than it was blaring up to the moment the storm hit. The description set the stage of a classic blowdown, with dancing quarter poles and confusion, and lost children. The animals, other than elephants and horses, had already been removed and taken to the train. "The yelling, screaming women . . . the pushing and the shoving, the unavailing circus men trying to calm the crowd . . ."⁸⁵ It was a scene played out many times in circus history.

Tragedies during the subsequent indoor exhibitions of Ringling-Barnum were generally of the nature of performer accidents, audience members no longer exposed to the risks of the canvas big top. As appropriate to a modern entertainment enterprise, as a matter of good business policy and an expression of care for employees and their customers, the show routinely made advance preparations for such an occurrence. During wire-walker Philippe Petit's two-year contract with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 1975-1976, Euday L. Bowman's well-known 1914 composition, "The 12th Street Rag," signaled emergencies.

"Disaster" was dropped from the daily show lexicon and the music was less formal. It was the call for everyone to drop whatever they were doing and to head to the arena floor. In the case of the clowns, they grabbed a gag prop with which to distract the audience from any visual semblance of an accident or tragedy. Their antics, with the upbeat and toe-tapping tempo of the ragtime tune was intended to shift minds away from whatever had happened. Barry Lubin recalled doing this when Petit experienced his first-ever and only fall. He thankfully escaped with only broken ribs.⁸⁶



In an effort to promote the show's capacity in fire safety, in 1949 Ringling-Barnum produced this specially arranged view of six water tank trucks all fitted with pumps that could propel flame-dousing water streams as high as the peak of the big top.

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In an era when fewer and fewer live musicians accompany shows, just how they signal an emergency, or disaster, has changed. Musician Megan O'Malley, quoting her boss, Brett Barlow, a Ringling show bandleader of 20 years, stated that they have dropped all use of "The Disaster March," as they termed Sousa's piece. In the event of a show-interrupting event, such as a missed trick, the band repeated a selected portion of the score, called "vamping."⁸⁷ An injury called for playing of the "infamous Emergency Music," as recalled by Lubin. **[Bw]**

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Steam fire engines and circus/fire

Steam-powered fire engines were adapted by several traveling shows to serve as the basis for electric power generating wagons from the early 1880s into the 20th century. Two fire shows and three circuses toured with one or more actual horse-drawn, steam-powered fire engines in 1906-1907, during a short flurry of interest in fire-fighting exhibitions inspired by the great success of Chief Hale's Fire Fighting presentation at the 1904 World's Fair. These devices were for performance purposes only; not actual fire-fighting.

To the best of our knowledge, no circus before World War II carried a self-propelled fire engine. It was assumed that the local fire department would be called upon to fight blazes, as they would any other conflagrations within their jurisdiction.

Though already in use on traveling carnivals, the circus industry commitment to the horse culture was such that one did not utilize any internal combustion-powered trucks until experimenting with them between 1909 and 1915. The practice accelerated after Sells-Floto and Barnum & Bailey added a four-wheel Knox and the first Mack AC Bulldog, respectively, for 1916 and 1917. A period

of trial and error ensued over the next couple decades, involving different makes and types of trucks, the Mack vehicles generally gaining the most favor. They pulled wagons between the train and lot and also hauled various loads in box bodies, as well as serving as a mechanical stake driver platform.⁸⁸

Water wagons had served on circus lots by the 1880s, and probably before, distributing water to the cookhouse, dressing tops, watering troughs, animal care facilities and more, as well as sprinkling the lot to retard blowing dust. These were usually filled by local city hydrants, the contents dispersed by gravity. In the 1920s, water tanks were starting to be applied to self-propelled trucks, to speed up the water service.

Eventually water trucks were fitted with pumps to improve water distribution capability, meaning more gallons per minute. They were usually mounted on the driver's side running board, rotated by a power take-off from the drive shaft.

The earliest known circus water truck to be identified with fire-fighting designation was on the 1929 Al G. Barnes circus. It was a new Mack AC Bulldog and carried a title on the sides of the water tank reading "Al G. Barnes Fire Dept." A description of it states that it had: a 793-gallon capacity water tank; a Mack-furnished hose reel; and was outfitted with a Viking

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39. *Daily Gate City* (Keokuk, Iowa), November 7, 1874 and *New York Clipper*, November 21, 1874, p. 271.
40. J. Griswold, op. cit., p. 340.
41. *Jasper (Indiana) Weekly Courier*, September 27, 1878 and *Cincinnati Daily Star*, September 4, 1878.
42. Alvaro Bentancourt [A. B. Stewart], *My Diary or Route Book of P. T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth and The Great London Circus for the Season of 1883*, p. 31; *Milwaukee Daily Journal*, June 5, 1883; *New York Clipper*, June 9, 1883, p. 198.
43. *New York Clipper*, August 4, 1883, p. 323.
44. Harry P. Bowman, *As Told on a Sunday Run*, (1942), p. 3.
45. *New York Clipper*, May 7, 1892, p. 130, and clipping, Greencastle, Indiana credit, May 22, 1892, Circus World Museum.
46. Jackson (Michigan) *Daily Citizen*, June 7, 1892.
47. Alf. T. Ringling, *Seasons of 1895 and 1896, With the Circus, A Route Book of Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Shows*, p. 143.
48. *Sauk County Democrat* (Baraboo, Wisconsin), August 1, 1901 and Alf. T. Ringling, *The Circus Annual Season of 1901*.
49. *New York Clipper*, August 3, 1901, pp. 485, 488.
50. *New York Clipper*, September 13, 1902, p. 630.
51. *Billboard*, May 19, 1906, p. 22; *New York Clipper*, May 19, 1906, p. 354; clipping, *Toledo (Ohio) Times*, undated, John F. Polacsek collection.
52. *Billboard*, January 19, 1907, pp. 16, 24, 15.
53. *Show World*, September 28, 1907.
54. *Billboard*, October 24, 1908, pp. 18-20.

trucks

high pressure pump delivering 50 gallons per minute. The pump output could be directed into a hose, or to a pipe that led to the front of the truck, where the stream watered the lot. A hose could also be attached there. It ended up on Ringling-Barnum in 1939, where it was assigned number 130 and later 230.

Two more Barnes Fire Dept. trucks also went onto RBBB; all three had "Fire Dept." on the front of the engine hood in the Barnes-Floto years.⁸⁹ To what degree employees were trained in fighting fires with the equipment is unknown.

In 1944, Ringling-Barnum toured with four trucks with water tanks, three with 1,000-gallon capacity and one of 800.



Stephen T. Flint collection

The mounted pumps delivered 56 gallons per minute, and a purposeful stream from one of the trucks could reach a target 25 to 50 feet high. The 1,000-gallon trucks could deliver a single stream for almost 18 minutes while the 800-gallon unit could continue for over 14 minutes.

55. *New York Clipper*, May 28, 1910, p. 391; *Billboard*, May 28, 1910, p. 32; *Washington (D. C.) Post*, May 22, 1910. A recollection of the fire by one present can be found at: <http://gremsdoolittlelibrary.blogspot.com/2014/05/the-day-circus-came-to-town.html>
56. *New York Supplement*, Vol. 150, (1915), pp. 1022-1023.
57. *New York Clipper*, op. cit.
58. *Billboard*, August 31, 1912, p. 22.
59. *Sauk County (Baraboo, Wisconsin) Democrat*, August 29, 1912.
60. *Billboard*, November 8, 1913, p. 24; *Columbus (Georgia) Enquirer-Sun*, October 26, 1913; Bob Brisendine Papers, Emory University; *Atlanta Constitution*, October 26 and 27, 1913; and *Columbus (Georgia) Ledger*, October 26, 1913, Courtesy Richard J. Reynolds III.
61. *The Insurance Press*, November 8, 1916, p. 9.
62. *Billboard*, August 15, 1944, p. 57; *White Tops*, July-August 1978, pp. 40-46.
63. *Billboard*, August 15, 1942, pp. 38 and 46.
64. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Business Records, Circus World Museum.
65. Stewart O'Nan, *The Circus Fire, A True Story*, (2000), pp. 16-17, has additional information on the investigation.
66. Confirming references for his circus employment are in the "yellow tickets," Circus World Museum, Robert L. Parkinson Library.
67. S. Frederick Starr, *Louis Moreau Gottschalk*, (2000), 106-107. The score is available online and it is performed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RoprGX_yo4. Much more is available concerning the origin of the piece and the extended heritage it represents.
68. Circus World Museum, Robert L. Parkinson Library.
69. William H. Rehrig, *Heritage Encyclopedia of Band Music*, (1991), Vol. I, p. 359.
70. A version, played on some type of automatic piano, can be heard at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0vyBGMSy0w&list=PLGURr>

- QbwGkfDHRWzFXzncJtkvqaRGP0Si&index=7&t=0s.
71. This memoir was apparently penned by Edwin Q. Yeisley, who was a cornet player with Barnum and Bailey in 1917, when Karl King was the director. The account is online at: http://karlking.us/story_y.htm.
72. Thomas J. Hatton, *Karl L. King. An American Bandmaster*, (1975; rpt. 2011); *Billboard*, June 9, 1917, pp. 3 and 11.
73. *The Washington (D. C.) Daily News*, May 19, 1936.
74. The preserved instrument is at Circus World Museum.
75. Marc Hirsch, "Boston Pops with Cirque de la Symphonie at Symphony Hall," *Boston Globe*, May 19, 2014.
76. Gene Plowden, *Merle Evans, Maestro of the Circus*, (1971), p. 123.
77. *Tampa Bay (Florida) Times*, March 19, 1942.
78. *New York Times*, July 7, 1944.
79. *PM Daily*, July 7, 1944.
80. *Chicago Daily News*, July 6, 1944.
81. *Joplin (Missouri) Globe*, July 7, 1944.
82. *Hartford Daily Courant*, July 8, 1944.
83. *Boston Globe*, July 7, 1944.
84. Jackie LeClaire posting on W. H. Woodcock blog, November 14, 2010, <https://www.blogger.com/comment.g?blogID=8897242&postId=3574174675930566030>.
85. *Geneva (New York) Times*, July 2, 1956.
86. Barry Lubin, *Tall Tales of a Short Clown*, (2014), p. 64.
87. O'Malley's posting date was August 31, 2015 at <https://www.quora.com/What-types-of-things-does-a-live-circus-band-do-to-distract-or-recover-from-show-problems>.
88. See the author's "From Horse Power to Horsepower, The Caterpillar Tractor and the Circus," *Bandwagon*, November-December 2002, pp. 33-38.
89. The Mack truck information in this paragraph was furnished by Steve Flint.

Circus People Tell of the Terrible Afternoon in Hartford



Fire starting to race up tent



First-hand accounts of Ringling performers and employees provide a dramatic telling of the fire that in minutes consumed the big top and took the lives of 168 people attending the matinee performance. Roland Butler summed it up for everyone associated with the show when he wrote in the 1944 route book that the tragedy in Hartford was “like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky.” It was the worst day in circus history, and few, if any, saw it coming.

“We were all in the dressing tent. It was very hot and we could hear the band very well. They were driving the animals out of the arena and they were doing a reprise of this original Faust music...and all of a sudden, we heard this crescendo of voices coming up, things getting louder, and we suddenly became aware that something was amiss.”¹

– Jackie Le Claire (clown)

“We heard a roar, like the applause when one of the big acts comes off, only we knew the animal act was over and there shouldn’t be any applause. We knew something was wrong. Then we smelled smoke.”²

– Felix Adler (clown)

“I was half dressed, getting ready to go to the aerial act, and someone said, ‘There’s a fire.’ We raised the canvas [sidewall of the dressing tent near the east end of the performance tent] to look and we could see the fire on top of the big top...and it was so fast. It was like a flash, and the whole tent was on fire.”³

– Mary Jane De Young [Miller]
(aerialist and production performer)

“The afternoon was muggy with the threat of storm. ... Then the Wallendas came on, and this magnificent troupe was working when I saw smoke... I whistled, motioned the Wallendas down... Eight thousand persons were in the stands. With one accord they tried to rush out as they had come in – toward the fire.”⁴

– Fred Bradna (Ringmaster)

“I leaned over the stand and yelled to Fred Bradna, the ringmaster, ‘get those lions out, the tent’s on fire.’ Then we swung into ‘The Stars and Stripes Forever,’ and we kept playing until the flames were 60 feet from the stand. Then we moved down beside the bandstand and kept playing until we marched outside. I looked back at the big tent and saw that a pole had crashed right on the spot where I stood on the bandstand.”⁵

– Merle Evans (Director of Music)



Emmett Kelly close-up

Circus World Museum

"I saw the fire when it started, along the seams over the sidewall near the front door. And I heard the band start playing the 'disaster march.' It was going toward the peak, burning the guy ropes. ...I don't know how many I got out but I cleared one or two sections before the fire drove me out."⁶

– *Howard Scharman (usher)*

"I was waiting for my first entrance, where I come in under the high wire act carrying that little net, when I heard screams in the big tent. First thought I had was that one of the Wallendas had fallen. That's what usually brings screams from a circus crowd."⁷

– *Emmett Kelly (featured clown)*

"When the flames hit the roof, we saw we had to get down fast. We slid down the ropes and headed for the performer's exit, but people were so crowded there that we saw we didn't have a chance. So we [some of the Wallendas] climbed over the cage that lines the exit. That was easy for us – we're performers. But the public couldn't get out that way."⁸

– *Herman Wallenda (high-wire performer)*

"...a child saved my life. I fell and they stepped on me. I could feel them over me and I knew I was going to be trampled to death. I heard her yell as she covered me with her little body 'The bright flying lady, help her' – and then an usher came and pulled us out."⁹

– *Helen Wallenda (high-wire performer)*

"People were lunging out of the stands, climbing over each other's back and screaming horribly, but still I had to get the animals [leopards and pumas] into the chute and away from the fire. I looked up and saw the flame racing along the top of the tent. The flaming embers dropped down on the animals and I was afraid they would turn on each other or on me. Finally, I shoved the last one into the chute. ...I ran outside the arena and reached the chute... It became much worse...injured people piled up against the chute, in trying to jump over it and get to the entrance. The wave of people dammed up against the chute became so great I began picking up children and passing them over."¹⁰

– *May Kovar (wild animal trainer)*

"...I could hear the grandstand chairs slamming inside the tent as people stampeded down onto the hippodrome track and made for the exits. Some were jumping off the top rows of the grandstand and bleacher seats, a distance of twelve feet, to the ground outside, and at one place a couple of quick-thinking circus workingmen had pulled the canvas sidewall out tight to make a sort of slanting chute that people could slide down."¹¹

– *Emmett Kelly*

"I saw people, who had plenty of time to get to safety just stand and watch the tent burn, and get burned up...I saw ushers and Candy Butchers stand in the tent until the heat chased them out. They were getting people out of the inferno. Hats off to Merle Evans and his band playing until the quarter poles were coming down."¹²

– *Alex Neuberger (rigger and husband of wire-walker Nio Niato)*

"I wish it were a dream. We all know the circus is hazardous – but none of us thought this tragedy possible. Does it do any good that I would have given my life to prevent the fire?"¹³

– *James A. Haley (First Vice President and Assistant to the President)*

"I don't know. I don't understand it – we made so many people happy, so many kids laugh..."¹⁴

– *Pat Valdo (Director of Performer Personnel)*

“Every test we put that tent through showed that it would resist fire; a fire might endanger some of the equipment but would never endanger a human life.”¹⁵

– Robert Ringling (President)

“I read about the fire in the *Stars and Stripes* at an OSS advance base in Normandy. I have no words to describe my sickened reaction – the ‘horrors of war’ paled by comparison.”¹⁶

– Henry Ringling North
(former and future Vice President)

“The prophets of doom forecast that we would be eaten up with debt, torn asunder by lawsuits and broken by friction from within our own ranks, but they reckoned without the stuff that circus people are made of.”¹⁷

– F. Beverly Kelley (Director of Radio Dept.)

Bandwagon Editor’s Endnotes

1. Jackie Le Claire interview with David Lewis Hammarstrom in Sarasota, Florida, April 20, 1986.
2. “Adler Says Fire’s Roar Sounded Like Applause,” *The Hartford Daily Current*, July 7, 1944, p.3.
3. Mary Jane Miller interview with Julie Parkinson in Sarasota, Florida, October 24, 2016.
4. Fred Bradna as told to Hartzell Spence, *The Big Top* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), p. 262. Although attendance estimates ranged greatly, Ringling-Barnum Vice President James Haley later noted the official attendance was 6,789.
5. “Big Top Fire was Worst Experience,” *Associated Press Dispatch*, July 8, 1944.
6. Gene Plowden, *Merle Evans Maestro of the Circus* (Miami: E. A. Seemann Publishing, Inc., 1971), p. 122.
7. “Hartford Tragedy Leaves Circus Artists Staggered,” *The Boston Daily Globe*, July 8, 1944, p. 2.
8. “135 Die In Circus Fire,” *St. Petersburg Times*, July 7, 1944, p. 2.
9. “Child Saves Death-Defying Wire-Walker In Fire,” *The Dayton Herald*, July 7, 1944, p.18.
10. “Woman Trainer Tells Horror Story,” *Miami News*, July 7, 1944, p. 2.
11. Emmett Kelly with F. Beverly Kelley, *Clown* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1954), p. 218.
12. Letter from Alex Neuberger to Sverre Braathen dated July 12, 1944, Milner Library, Illinois State University.
13. “Toll of Circus Fire Mounts to Many Hundreds,” *United Press Dispatch*, July 8, 1944.
14. “The Flying Wallendas ‘Look Down Into Hell,’” *Pittsburgh Press*, July 7, 1944, p. 13. Newspaper accounts on July 7 misidentified Valdo as “Pat Waldo.”
15. “Circus,” *Miami News*, July 7, 1944, p.2. Robert Ringling was not present at the fire in Hartford. He was at his home in Evanston, Illinois.
16. Henry Ringling North and Alden Hatch, *The Circus Kings* (Garden City and New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960), p. 329. The Office of Strategic Services was an agency that coordinated American intelligence activities during World War II.
17. F. Beverly Kelley, *It Was Better than Work* (Gerald, Missouri: The Patrice Press, 1982), p. 169.




May Kovar with leopard on shoulders

Circus World Museum

INSIDE THE HARTFORD CIRCUS FIRE

by Michael R. Skidgell



SEASON No. 3 1944

OFFICIAL TOUR

NEW YORK OFFICE
10 ROCKEFELLER PLAZA

General Offices & Winter Quarters
SARASOTA, FLORIDA

CHICAGO OFFICE
188 N. CLARK STREET

ALLOW MAIL ENOUGH TIME TO REACH POINTS NAMED BEFORE DATE GIVEN

DATE	TOWN	STATE	R R	MILES
July 3	Providence	Rhode Island	BGM-NYNHGH	173
" 4	"	"	"	"
" 5	Hartford	Connecticut	NYNHGH	90
" 6	"	"	"	"
" 7	Springfield	Massachusetts	"	26
" 8	"	"	"	"
	SUNDAY			
July 10	Albany	New York	BGA	102
" 11	"	"	"	"
" 12	Schenectady	"	NYC	17
" 13	"	"	"	"
" 14	Utica	"	"	78
" 15	"	"	"	"
	SUNDAY			
July 17	Syracuse	New York	NYC	53
" 18	"	"	"	"
" 19	Rochester	"	"	80
" 20	"	"	"	"
" 21	Buffalo	"	"	68
" 22	"	"	"	"
	SUNDAY			
July 24	Akron	Ohio	NYC-PRR	224
" 25	"	"	"	"
" 26	"	"	"	"
" 27	Cleveland	"	PRR	39
" 28	"	"	"	"
" 29	"	"	"	"
" 30	"	"	"	"

The Big Show played Hartford on July 5 and 6, 1944. The next stand would have been Springfield, Massachusetts.

Circus World Museum

On a sunny day in May 1944, in preparation for the upcoming season of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus, the canvas roof of the new big top was laid out at the Sarasota winter quarters to be treated with water repellant. Truck and Tractor Superintendent David Blanchfield, with equipment and a crew of men, spread the canvas out. Boss Canvasman Leonard Aylesworth's crew of 70 men applied a gasoline and paraffin mixture onto the canvas with watering cans and spread it around with large brooms. The gasoline would evaporate after a short period of time, and the remaining wax coating would provide protection from rain. Once the canvas was exposed to the elements for a few days, all evidence of the gasoline would dissipate.

Although it was now waterproof, the big top canvas had never been given a fireproofing treatment, despite Robert Ringling insisting on using a fire-resistant canvas, regardless of cost, when he took over as President of the circus in 1943. Samples of treatments said to be fireproofed were tested and still found to be flammable, and Aylesworth did not feel the process impregnated the canvas enough to endure the beating that the circus big top took during a season. The big top sidewalls were not given any fire or water protection treatment.

Ringling's 1944 season began in Sarasota in March with a couple of charity performances, then the show played indoor arenas for two months at New York City's Madison Square Garden and Boston Garden in Massachusetts. Strict new fire laws were in place for the indoor shows, particularly in Boston, where the Coconut Grove night club fire had claimed 492 lives less than two years earlier. After the indoor engagements, the circus big top

and other equipment joined the rest of the show in Philadelphia in June for two weeks of under-canvas performances.

After Philadelphia, the show moved to New England for performances in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine. While in Portland, Maine on June 30 and July 1, two of the temporary workers that Ringling picked up were “town clown” Roy Tuttle and fourteen-year-old runaway Robert Dale Segee. Both would both later be investigated for their possible involvement in the Hartford circus fire. During one of the Portland performances, a spectator alerted an attendant to a small fire on an aerialist’s rigging, and it was quickly extinguished.

Providence, Rhode Island hosted the Big Show on the 3rd and 4th of July 1944.

Ringling’s 587 employees for that date was far short of the 800 that was required to move the show efficiently, and the manpower shortage in Hartford would be even more evident. Though the Providence Police Department confirmed that they received no reports of fires at the circus during these performances, seat-man Neil Todd would later testify that he had used pails of water to put out about a dozen fires on the sidewall canvas during the under-canvas part of the season, including one in Providence. Todd worked under the grandstand seats at each performance, where the floor beneath the seats was nearly solid and the only place for a cigarette to be dropped directly down below was at the top row of seats. Todd noted that he had found several dropped cigarettes at every show. Ringling prohibited employees

Panto’s Paradise was the theme of the 1944 spec. The production under the big top was photographed by Robert Good just a few weeks before the devastation in Hartford.

Circus World Museum



who worked around the public from smoking during performances, and all smoking was forbidden by order of Boss Canvasman Aylesworth when the big top was being erected and taken down. Preventing patrons from smoking was a futile task without help from local authorities and was only attempted by the circus when requested. The show's "No Smoking" signs were only displayed in cities when required by the fire officials, and Hartford made no such request in 1944 or any previous year.

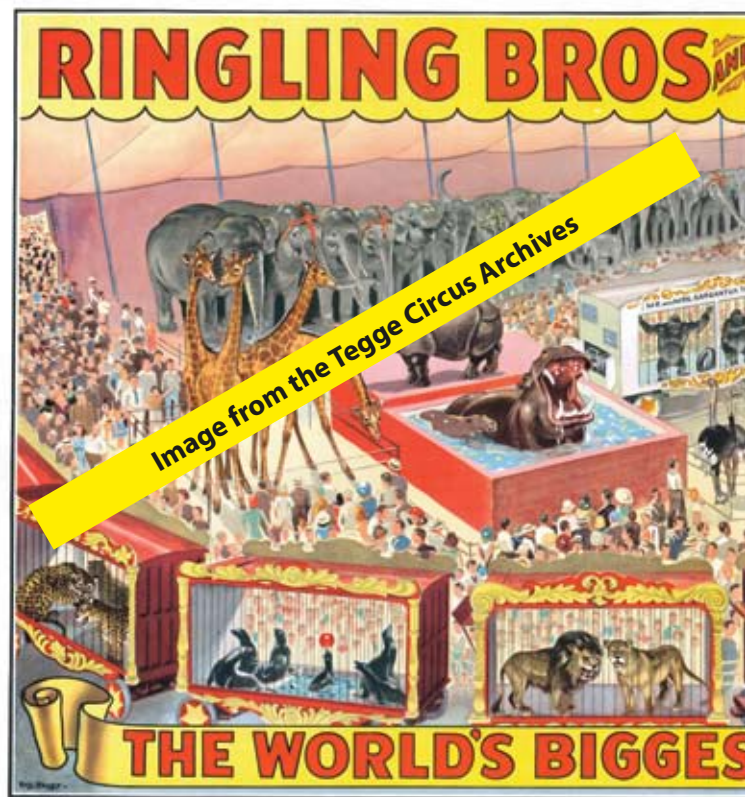
As the show trains were traveling between Providence and Hartford, the circus experienced rail delays and was late to its destination on Wednesday July 5. The delay forced the matinee to be cancelled, but the show was ready in time for the evening performance.

The nine-acre Barbour Street circus grounds lot had been mowed and raked a day or two before the Big Show arrived in town, with some trimmings left behind for the circus to use as feed and bedding for certain animals. All available hands were called on for setting up the circus grounds, and local men and boys were recruited to help in exchange for free passes or hot meals from the cook tent.

A crew of ushers spread out the sidewall canvas and put the side poles in place. The ushers also erected the grandstand seating, and they put the red grandstand chairs in place. After each performance, the ushers moved these wooden folding chairs and swept the entire grandstand floor area. After the last performance, they tore it all down and packed it up, including the sidewall canvas. Assistant Boss Canvasman John "Blinkie" Meck and his crew installed the sidewalls of the big top, tying the canvas to the poles at the top and stretching it tight at the bottom. They often dug a shallow trench at the base of the sidewall to catch rainwater run-off, and the sidewall canvas sat in the trench with the turned up dirt forming a curb on the inner side of the sidewall. Along the tent side poles, the sidewall canvas could be lowered for ventilation. Meck was under the seats near the animal runway in the northwest corner of the big top when the fire broke out. He would later testify that it had been a couple of years since he had seen a sidewall on fire, though he knew that the seat men sometimes put out fires caused by discarded cigarettes.

Canvas enclosures for the toilets were installed next to the big top, men to the right of the main entrance canopy when entering the tent, and women to the left. Joe Lloyd, Ringling's caretaker of the stake and chain wagons, with a small crew of men, took a hundred-foot length of untreated canvas and formed a topless, four-sided box, with a doorway, around the wooden structure and oil drums that comprised the toilets. These enclosures were erected right beside the big top sidewall, with just an inch or two between, and the top of the toilet enclosure sidewalls were lowered a bit, with the excess canvas bunched up at the bottom.

A week after the fire, Lloyd revisited the fire site with Connecticut investigators and recovered a seventy-foot



AFTERNOON & NIGHT
HARTFORD | **WED. JULY**
 BARBOUR ST. SHOW GROUNDS

Although the wild animal menagerie was featured in 1944 advertising, the tent could not be used at the Barbour Street showgrounds due to the tight nature of the lot.

Tegge Circus Archives

length of the yellow canvas from the men's toilet enclosure area. One-third of the piece had burned, the portion that was in direct contact with the big top sidewall, and the remains lay right where they fell. Even though this piece of canvas remained unburned right where the fire originated, the wooden toilet structure and the oil drums were scorched. No chemicals were used in the toilets aside from disinfectants and deodorizers, ruling out the possibility of the fire having been started from a chemical reaction in the toilet enclosure. However, the men's enclosure was where the fire is believed to have started. No attendants were on duty at the toilet facilities, but Ringling employees typically checked on them periodically during the show.



Ringling's advance man had made arrangements for the Hartford shows in February 1944, and he let Ringling's Legal Adjuster, Herbert DuVal, know what licenses and fees were required. After the circus arrived in Hartford on the afternoon of July 5, DuVal paid the City Clerk \$300 for the license to exhibit on the circus lot, and \$500 to Hartford's Superintendent of Public Buildings for rental of the Barbour Street grounds from the City of Hartford.

On July 6, DuVal had received word that the owner of McGovern's Granite Works, located on the lot right next to the circus grounds, was looking to be reimbursed for additional security he had to employ to protect his property during the engagement. As he stepped out of his white office wagon for a meeting with someone from McGovern's that would never happen, DuVal noticed flames lapping up from the area near the men's toilets, with the edge of the roof just catching fire.

Ringling's 1944 big top was 200 feet wide by 450 feet

long, with sidewalls that were 15 feet high. The canvas roof sloped upward from the top of the sidewall to a towering 48 feet, with each protruding center pole topped with an American flag. The tent was erected over freshly mowed grass, dry from the summer heat, and dirt that had to be watered down and covered with hay and wood shavings to reduce dust. Inside the massive tent, there were three rings and two stages for the performers, with a 25-foot wide oval "hippodrome track" separating the performance area from the spectator's seats. Patrons were allowed on this track until the show began. Then the 60 ushers stationed around the tent required the spectators to remain behind the railings.

General admission bleacher seats, painted blue, were at the east and west ends of the big top, two sections of bleachers at each end separated by an exit. These bleachers could accommodate about 3,400 spectators, and about 6,000 reserved seats were provided along the north and south sides of the big top, divided into 20 lettered sections. Exiting the tent could be accomplished via the main entrance, or by eight other smaller exits located around the big top. However, many of these were used primarily by the performers and some were blocked on the outside by circus wagons. Nearly 7,000 spectators were in attendance for the July 6 matinee show.

David Blanchfield, born and raised in Hartford, managed a crew of about 40 men, and since he needed hard-to-find experienced men who could operate trucks and heavy equipment, his crew had been short-staffed all season. His men had not been given any formal instructions on fire-fighting; they just did what he told them to do when there was an emergency. Included in Blanchfield's fleet of trucks were four 1,000-gallon water trucks, each with a two-man crew and 100 feet of two-inch hose. They were not specifically for use in fighting fire but were regularly used to wet down the lot and to deliver water for the animals and to the cookhouse tent. The water trucks were each equipped with a pump powered by the truck's engine, capable of throwing a relatively narrow water stream about 60 feet. All four water trucks were full when the fire began, and had one of them been located close to the origin of the fire and responded before the fire reached the roof of the tent, disaster might have been averted.

Edward "Whitey" Versteeg was Ringling's Superintendent of the Electrical and Diesel Department, and was in charge of 32 men, 20 short of what he felt he needed. Versteeg was also in charge of the show's nearly four dozen fire extinguishers. When local fire officials required it and the general manager in turn directed it, a couple dozen of them were placed under the seats and at the exits. Since the Hartford Fire Department had not been required to inspect the grounds, they did not specify the placement of fire extinguishers in the big top. Versteeg had them placed in various trucks, tents, and wagons around the lot, useful locations during normal operations, but none were under the seats.

The circus preferred not to risk damaging the fire extinguishers by subjecting them to lot dust and breakage under the seats, especially when men positioned there with water buckets were normally very effective.

Hartford's Fire Marshal Henry Thomas not only investigated fires, but he also reported fire hazards and egress obstructions at places of public assembly to the State Fire Marshal and would order such offenses be corrected by the owner. Although he inspected the city buildings regularly, it had not been his practice to inspect the circus grounds. Such an inspection would have revealed the flammability of the canvas, inadequacy of the exits, perhaps the obstruction of certain exits when the animal runways were in place, and the absence of fire extinguishers inside the big top, but tradition prevailed and no inspection was made. The Hartford

lice and building departments, nothing was required from, nor requested of, the Fire Department. No complaints or reports were made to the Fire Marshal or the Chief regarding any hazardous conditions on the circus grounds, not that year or any year prior. It had also not been the custom of the Hartford Fire Department to detail any firefighters or apparatus to the grounds when the circus was in town, and on July 5 and 6, 1944, that again was the case.

Hartford's Building Supervisor sent an inspector to the Barbour Street grounds on the afternoon of July 5 as the circus workers were erecting the seats, and the inspector was satisfied with what he saw. The erection of the big top, the exits, and the seats were all accomplished like they had been done in years past. Building Code Regulations at the time lacked any provisions specifically for circuses, but Hartford's



Outstretched trunks of elephants sought treats from circus attendees in the open-air menagerie just before the start of the matinee performance on July 6, 1944.

Connecticut State Library photo courtesy of Michael Skidgell

Fire Department was never officially made aware of the circus being in town, having not been informed by the circus or by any City officials or employees.

Although the circus had to obtain permits from the po-

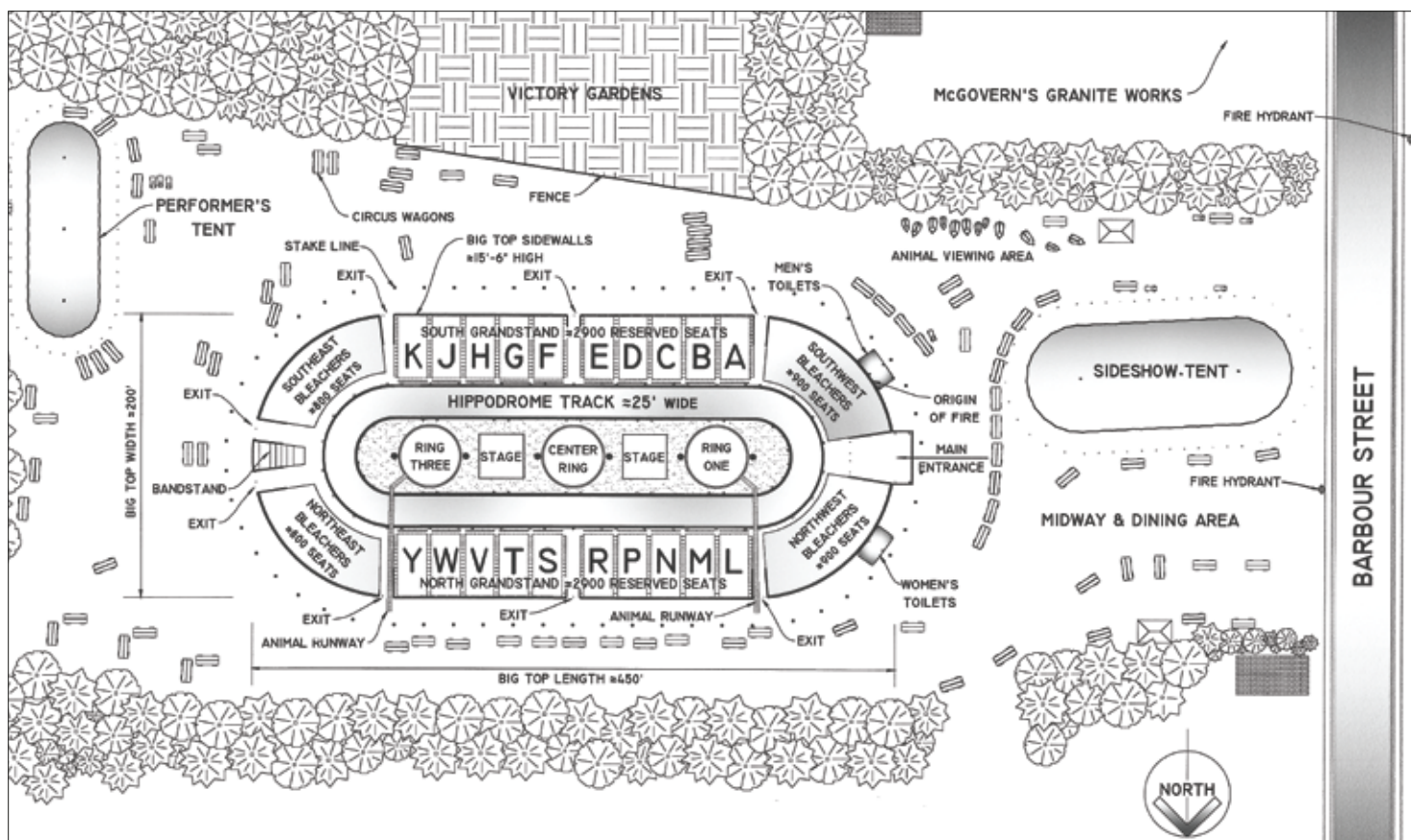
Building Department customarily inspected the adequacy of the exits in the big top and issued a Certificate of Occupancy, free of charge, as they did again on July 5. It was not until the day after the fire that someone from the Build-

ing Department actually took measurements of the exit locations in the big top. The July 5 evening show went on as scheduled, with a large crowd. The Hartford Police officers who were detailed to the circus grounds reported no problems that night and observed no fire hazards. Presumably, they noticed the animal runways blocking the hippodrome track during the wild animal act but did not recognize it as a potential hazard.

At 9:00 A.M. on the day of the fire, after letting his manager know, Boss Canvasman Leonard Aylesworth left the Barbour Street circus grounds with a few men and headed for Springfield, Massachusetts, the Big Show's next city on the route. His first assistant had taken leave from the show a few days earlier due to a death in the family, which left the seat men back in Hartford without supervision. Aylesworth intended to be back before the first show, but he was delayed when the truck they were waiting for got lost. After getting his men started laying out the Springfield lot, he headed back to Hartford and noticed the smoke in the sky as he approached the city. When he arrived around 3:00 P.M., the big top was already a smoldering ruin. He was able to account for all of his seat men, although he observed that John Cook, one of the men assigned to be under the southwest bleachers, was very distraught and perspiring. Aylesworth went to get an officer to help the man, and upon his return Cook was gone.

The weather before the July 6 afternoon show was sunny and hot with a temperature of 88 degrees. The grounds had dried since being watered down that morning and time constraints prevented them from being watered down again before the matinee show. Inside the big top, spectators were hot and uncomfortable. Some sections of the canvas side-walls were lowered a couple of feet to allow more air into the tent. Mothers, children and grandparents comprised a majority of the crowd, as many of Connecticut's able-bodied men were either in military service overseas or working in one of Hartford's war plants. Patrons entered the grounds from Barbour Street and were tempted by the sideshow attractions and various circus vendors in the midway area. Past the sideshow was the animal menagerie on display in the open, as the Barbour Street lot was not large enough for the menagerie tent to be set up. As a result, the animal cages, picket lines and elephants were positioned in somewhat cramped open areas between the sideshow and big top.

The matinee began just a few minutes after its scheduled 2:15 P.M. start time as Merle Evans' Big Show Band, at the far end of the big top, opposite the main entrance, began playing the Star Spangled Banner. Equestrian Director Fred Bradna then welcomed the crowd with a spectacular parade of horses, elephants and performers. As the end of the parade passed by, prop men installed the steel cage runways that connected to the animal cages in the end rings. The run-



This drawing is an accurate representation of the Barbour Street showgrounds layout for Ringing Bros. and Barnum & Bailey on July 5 and 6 in Hartford, Connecticut.

drawing by Michael Skidgell

ways, about four feet tall and three feet wide, were installed directly across the hippodrome track, passing through two of the exits on the long, north side of the tent, leaving room for only a single file of people to enter or exit at one time.

Outside of the tent, the runways connected to the wild animal wagons that were parked adjacent to the stakeline about 15 feet from the tent. Access around the hippodrome track was restricted when the runways were in place, and the prop men would be removing them as soon as the last of the animals were back in the wagons. Two sets of four-foot wide wooden steps were installed to allow patrons, many just arriving, to step over the runways to get to their seats. Each runway had a telescoping section that was designed to allow it to easily slide over the next section, creating an opening to pass through without the need for steps, but master animal trainer Alfred Court did not favor this feature of the runways. He believed their use increased the risk of his animals escaping and threatening the safety of circus goers. Thus, the telescoping sections were secured with rope to prevent accidental opening.

The first act of the show featured dozens of showgirls in military costumes being trained by others costumed as lions with whips. The exotic animal acts trained by Alfred Court followed next in the arenas set up in rings one and three. Court was contracted to provide the animals, trainers, cages, runways and other equipment, and Ringling personnel were responsible for the installation and removal of the cages and runways before and after the impressive display. Court himself was in New York City on the day of the fire while his trainers were presenting his animals. In ring three, Joseph Walsh showed trained lions, polar bears and Great Danes, while May Kovar and Wilson Storey commanded a collection of leopards and pumas in ring one.

As the animal acts concluded, the trainers began to move their animals out of the steel arenas. The Wallendas took their positions on high-wire platforms 30 feet above the ground. On one platform stood Karl Wallenda and opposite him on the platform above the north section of the big top were Karl's wife Helen, his older brother Herman, long-term friend Joe Geiger, and Helen's sister Henrietta. The Wallenda troupe members took their positions and while waiting for Merle Evans to cue their music, they heard screams and saw the fire behind the southwest bleachers. They held their positions, expecting the seat men to extinguish the fire quickly so they could proceed with their act.

Two of the eight seat men in the big top were assigned by Leonard Aylesworth to the west end bleachers, the two large sections of general admission seats to the immediate left and right of the main entrance. They helped install the seating during set up, which gave them a good knowledge of the system so they could spot a support jack that was out of place. Working his first season with the circus, seat man John "Cookie" Cook sat underneath the southwest bleacher seats until about 2:15, when he left and went to the north-

west bleachers, checking the jacks along his way around to the animal runway that passed through the northwest exit. Cook's fellow seat man under the west end bleachers, William "Red" Caley, a muscular former coal miner, left his post under the southwest bleachers a few minutes later and joined Cook at the northwest animal runway. Part of their job was to watch the seating support jacks when the prop men removed the animal runway that was next to their bleacher section. Caley thought that Cook might be too inexperienced to properly handle the task. One error by the men removing the runway sections could cause a part of the seating platform to collapse. Caley advised Cook to go back to the southwest bleachers, but Cook stayed to watch the men remove the runways.

At about 2:40 P.M., usher Kenneth "Sheik" Gwinnell first noticed the fire to his right as he was facing the reserved seats on the south side of the big top. The fire was about five feet off the ground, on the canvas sidewall of the big top behind the middle of the bleachers full of seated patrons. He ran to fellow usher Mike "Dare" D'addario who was on the track in front of his section, the southwest bleachers. When D'addario heard Gwinnell shout to him, he saw the fire climbing the sidewall and the two ran under the bleachers where they were joined by usher Louis Runyan, who had been stationed at the northeast bleachers at the far end of the big top.

The three ushers each grabbed one of the four-gallon buckets of water under the seats, and D'addario tossed the water onto the burning sidewall. Runyan tried to pull the sidewall down, but it was installed tight to the top of the side poles in this location, with the open-top men's toilet enclosure directly on the other side. By this time the fire had moved about ten feet up the sidewall, and in the few seconds it took Gwinnell to get a fourth bucket of water, the flames reached the canvas roof and began to spread. The firefighting ushers realized that the fire was not going to be stopped with the equipment they had, and they immediately resorted to evacuating patrons out of the big top.

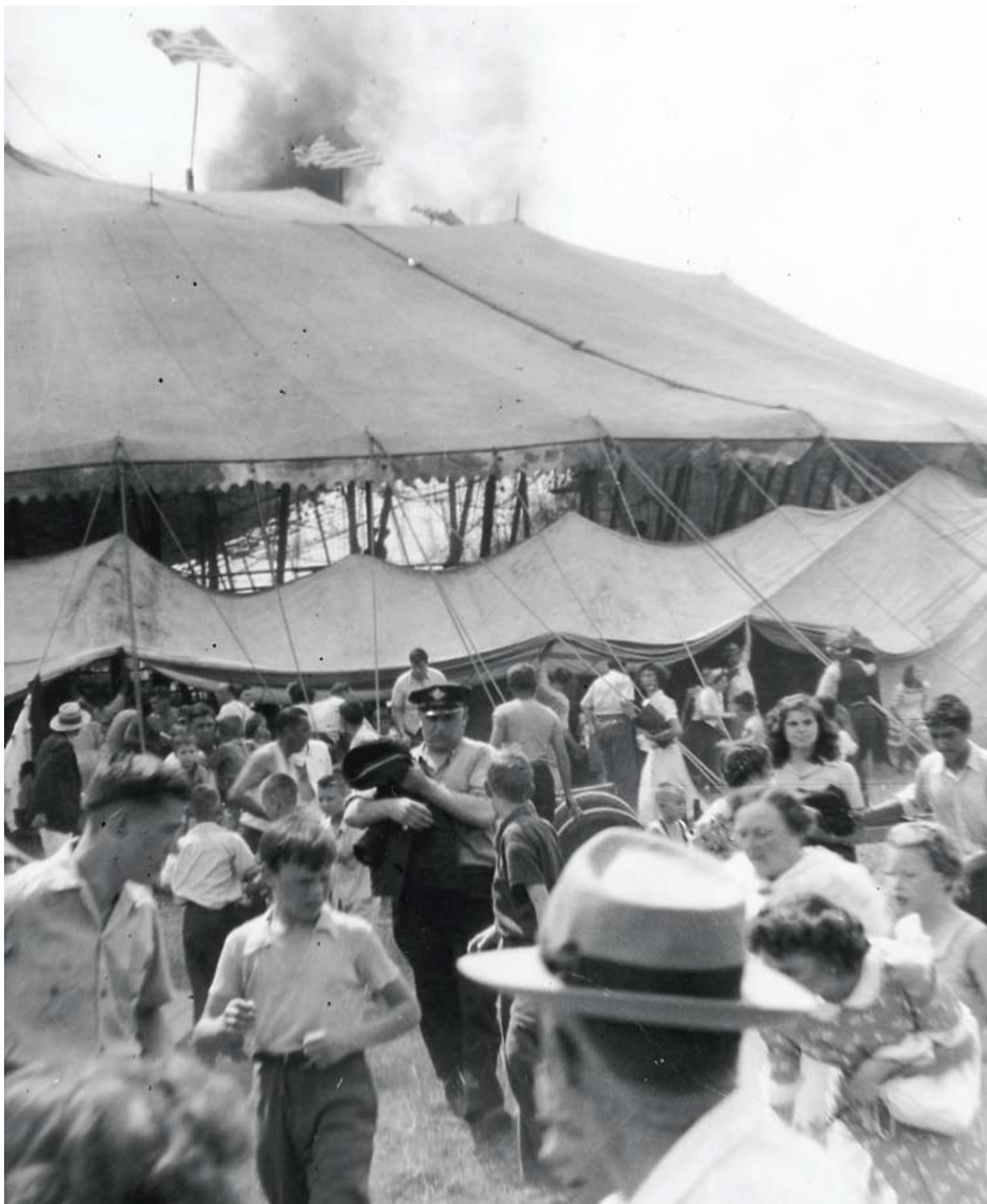
Seat men Caley and Cook, under the bleachers watching the animals go through the runway, heard screams and commotion above them. Thinking an animal had escaped, they went out into the arena and observed the fire reaching the roof of the big top, right above the opposite section of bleachers that they were responsible for watching. No one else was assigned to or allowed under those seats. It was their responsibility to patrol their assigned areas and to watch for any potential fire hazards. In case of a fire that they could not extinguish with water buckets, the seat-men had been told to use a knife to cut the ropes and pull the sidewall down to keep the roof canvas from catching on fire.

When the Wallendas saw the flames rise and ignite the edge of the canvas roof, Karl motioned to his fellow performers to get down. May Kovar noticed the flames above her as she was sending her cats into the northwest runway,



This view of the burning big top was taken from Barbour Street looking east. The sideshow tent is in the left foreground and elephants are visible at the right.

Ralph Emerson Sr. photograph courtesy of Michael Skidgell



Looking southwest toward the origin of the blaze, the flames are visible above the sidewall that had been lowered to allow some air to pass through the tent. A great number of spectators escaped under the sidewall around the perimeter of the big top.

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and she tried to rush the animals out while struggling with one who tried to run back into the ring. She also had to separate a couple of big cats who started to fight inside the runway as patrons climbed over. At the other end of the big top, Joseph Walsh, who had six lions in ring number three, noticed the fire as he was moving the last of his animals into the northeast runway.

When he first became aware of the fire, Merle Evans directed his band to play "Stars and Stripes Forever" in an effort to keep everyone calm and avoid panic. As the crowd began to notice the fire and the commotion it was causing in the southwest corner of the circus tent, some thought the flames were part of the show. Others assumed that circus personnel would extinguish the fire before it posed a threat.

Most, however, began to rush toward the exits, particularly the one from which they entered just minutes earlier.

Spectators in the bleacher sections, especially the ones at the west end where the fire began, had the best opportunities to exit the tent. There were wide exits at each end of the big top, next to each bleacher section, and the design of the bleacher seating, wooden planks with the spectator's feet dangling, allowed a person to slide through to ground level. From the ground, they could escape under the sidewall or out the end of the bleacher structure, into an exit-way. From the top rows of seats, about ten and a half feet off the ground, some slid down the side-pole ropes behind them, or jumped down behind the seats and escaped under the sidewall or through openings cut by patrons and circus workers. Sev-



The flaming inferno was accelerated due to the paraffin application to the canvas as well as by Mother Nature's summer afternoon breeze.

Circus World Museum

eral of those who jumped suffered injuries to their legs, feet, ankles and backs.

At first, those leaving did not panic; only a few mothers and children cried out for each other while policemen and circus ushers kept the crowd moving and calm. A sudden breeze fed the fire, and sheets of flame shot toward the northeast and northwest corners of the big top. Spectators then began to panic as they scrambled to get out of the tent. Ushers waved their arms and tried to calm the crowd, and the band continued to play.

In the northeast section of the big top, people were struggling to get over the steel animal runway that blocked the hippodrome track and most of the exit. The stairway to get over the runway was jammed and people were trying to climb over the steel bars while police officers tried, unsuccessfully, to pull the runway sections apart. As the fire accelerated, more and more of the canvas was consumed and some of the quarter poles began to fall, injuring those beneath.

The northerly breeze fanned the flames. Burning sheets and strips of canvas coated with hot melted wax fell onto those trying to flee, adding to the panic of the crowd. When the flames reached the center poles located near the middle of the big top, the entire north section of the canvas roof seemed to explode. The center poles began to fall, and the remains of the big top plummeted down in a blanket of flame upon the scores of people making their last desperate effort to escape the super-heated arena. Many of those still inside had suffered debilitating injuries or were trapped by runways and fallen poles and could only watch in horror as the burning canvas enveloped them. Their collective final screams blended with a chilling swishing sound as the air was pushed out of the tent by the falling sections of canvas, this horrible sound soon followed by a stunned stillness with only the crackling of the still-burning seats.

David Blanchfield had been in the backyard when he noticed flames coming from the southwest corner of the big top. He knew that there would be no saving the tent. He



View from the southeast corner of the lot near the performers dressing room tent, looking west.

photo by L. B. Ulrich courtesy Michael Skidgell

directed his men to move the equipment trucks that were close to the big top stake line, and he had a water truck spray the wheels of vehicles that had started to burn. Two other water trucks were sent to the north side to protect the animal cage wagons.

When told that people were trapped by the animal runway in the northeast exit, Blanchfield directed one of the trucks to spray water on the people in that area. As soon as possible, Blanchfield and his men searched the pile of bodies for signs of life and pulled two women out alive, one with just a hole burned in her stocking.

On the south side of the tent beside one of the stake and chain wagons, Ringling's wagon caretaker was shaving when he heard shouting. He looked and saw the tent ablaze and ran over and began cutting the sidewall with his knife, making openings for people to escape. Others made chutes by pulling out parts of the sidewall canvas and urged spectators to jump and slide to safety from the top row of the grandstand. East of the stake and chain wagons were two diesel engine "light plant" wagons and three electrical supply wagons.

"Whitey" Versteeg was in his office wagon, next to the light plants. The big top sidewall near his wagons had not yet caught fire, so he ordered his crew to cut the ropes that attached the canopy over his wagons to the big top. He and two of his men grabbed fire extinguishers from one of his wagons as the tractor men were pulling it away from the fire. Versteeg then used his extinguisher on his office wagon, which was starting to burn as it was being moved.

Ringling clown Emmett Kelly was in the performer's dressing room tent in the back lot when he heard the screaming and saw the black smoke. The sad-faced clown grabbed his bucket of wash water and ran out of the dressing tent towards the fire. As he approached the light plants, he joined the workers who were putting out the fire on the wagons.

Hartford Police Chief Charles Hallissey had arrived at the circus grounds about 2:30 P.M. moments after the fire had started. He entered the big top, and stood just inside the entrance to the left. There he discussed various issues with some of his men and Ringling's Police Chief John Brice. Brice was not only Ringling's police chief, but also the sole member of their police force, aside from four "old-timers" that the circus kept around as watchmen. Hallissey provided ten uniformed officers on the grounds and neighboring streets at no charge to the circus, and on July 6, in addition to these men, three Vice Division officers and three detectives were detailed to the grounds, all in plain clothes. Additionally, Chief Hallissey, his assistant chief, and the patrolman who drove them to the circus were on duty and on the scene. Inside the main entrance, they heard cries of "fire" and turned to see the flames on the sidewall behind the bleachers, not quite at the edge of the roof yet.

Brice bolted out of the tent to alert the circus management, while Hallissey's assistant ran to the cruiser to call in an alarm. Preparing for the crowd that would be rushing the

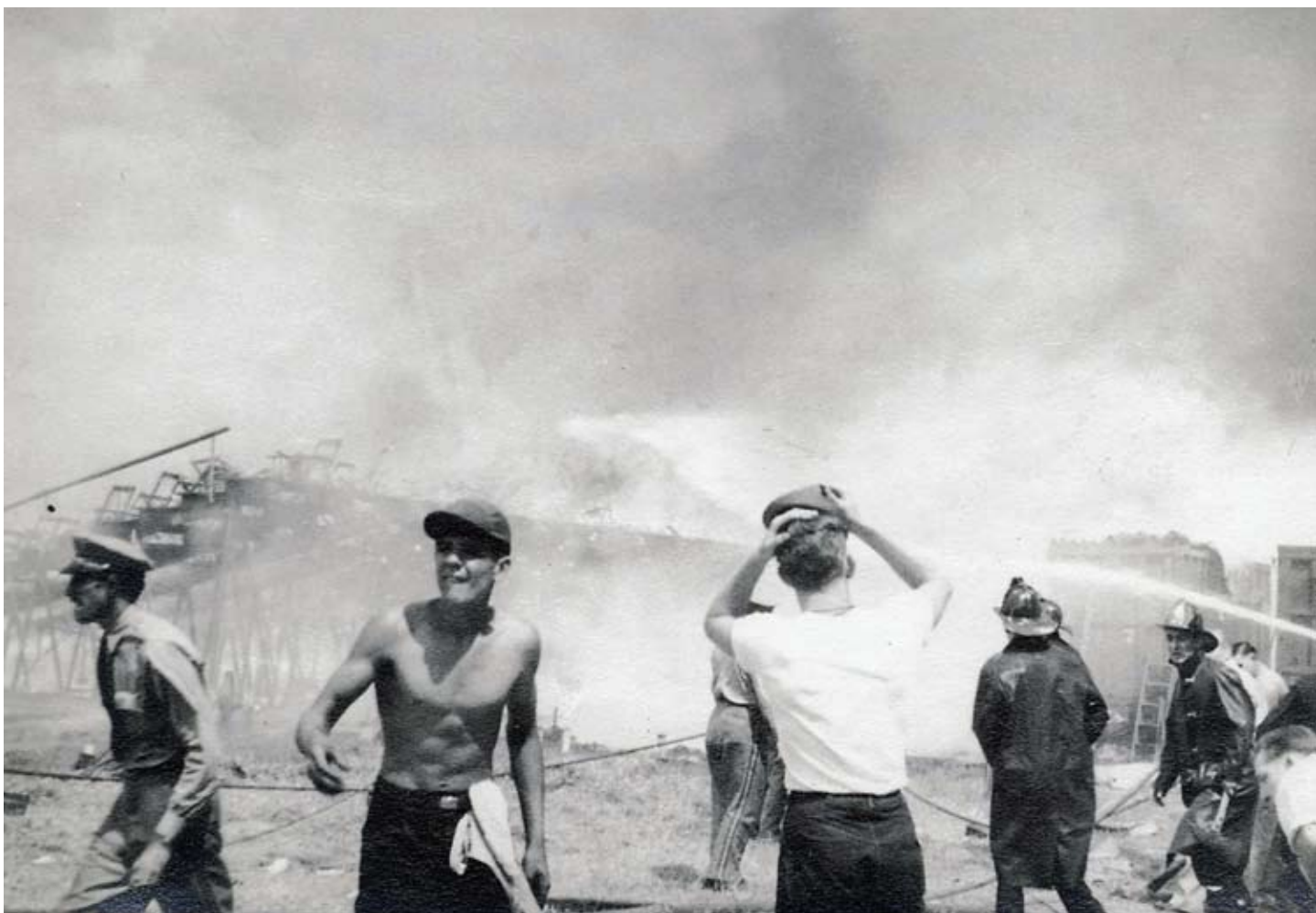
main entrance at any moment, Chief Hallissey joined the circus workers in moving the pipes, ropes, and canvas that obstructed the path out of the tent, as his policemen were helping people get out of the tent in an orderly manner.

Some parents in the top rows of the bleachers dropped their children down to the police officers, and as Officer Daniel McAuliffe caught one boy, the child's father jumped down and said, "That dirty son-of-a-bitch threw a cigarette butt!" and disappeared into the crowd. When Connecticut's Police Commissioner heard this during the officer's eye-witness account later that evening, he directed Officer McAuliffe and the Hartford Police Department to find the man who made the statement and to obtain more information about who tossed the cigarette. Attempts to find the man using newspaper and radio notices were unsuccessful.

Connecticut's Police Commissioner, Edward J. Hickey, who also held the position of State Fire Marshal, was in attendance at the circus, sitting in the top row of the reserved seats in Section G. Hickey heard the cries of "fire" and saw the flames and observed for a minute, watching to see if circus employees would put the fire out. Section G had cleared out before Hickey decided it was time to get his group out of the burning tent. The chairs in his section, and other reserved sections, were in heaps blocking the aisles down to the hippodrome track. Commissioner Hickey walked along the top row until he found a clear way to get down with the children from his group who had not already jumped down from the top of the bleachers. He got his party out and into a safe area just as the big top collapsed. Hickey made his way along the outside of the tent to the main entrance and made arrangements to have the State Armory opened to use as a morgue for the victims of the fire. As soon as the fire site had cooled enough to allow it, Hickey went to the southwest bleacher area, the most intact of the seating areas after the fire, and began his investigation.

The circus tractor drivers had hooked up the animal wagons and were hauling them out of the fire's reach as the first firefighters arrived on scene. Other circus hands were leading horses, elephants, and camels out to Barbour Street and the surrounding yards. The Hartford Fire Department received numerous alarms from call boxes, beginning at 2:44 P.M., and most of the department's engine companies in the vicinity were dispatched to the scene as the calls continued to come in.

The first engine on scene stretched 600 feet of 2½-inch hose along the south side of the lot and had water spraying in about four minutes after receiving the alarm. Another engine stopped on Barbour Street, connected to the hydrant and ran a line through the main entrance of what had been the big top. The tent was gone at this point, but the seating structures were all still burning, and there appeared to be bodies under some of the seating sections. All of the big top canvas had been consumed, roof and sidewall, and the supporting poles had fallen and were still burning. Any remain-



When City of Hartford firefighters arrived on the scene the tent had collapsed, but the wooden seating and big top poles were still burning.

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ing ropes and rigging that had not been consumed by the flames were strewn about. At the northeast exit, bodies were piled five deep next to the animal runway. Circus employees, policemen and civilians carried the dead outside of the ruins and where they were covered with canvas and taken to the back lot so they could be discreetly removed from the scene. Policemen were ordered to rope off the entire area and to not allow any circus personnel to leave the grounds.

The State's Medical Examiner and the County Coroner authorized the removal of the dead from the circus grounds, and the bodies were loaded onto Army trucks and taken to the State Armory where each was tagged as they were brought in. Identifications were expected to be difficult. In all, 127 dead were transported there from the circus grounds, plus three more unidentified bodies. By midnight on Friday, all but 15 had been identified. These unclaimed bodies, decomposing rapidly in the July heat, were removed to a refrigerated morgue where nine would be identified, leaving six unclaimed on Sunday night, July 9. Photographs were taken and dental reports were made in event anyone came forward at a future date looking to make identification, and the bodies were turned over for burial on Monday morning.

Hartford attorneys immediately began filing personal injury lawsuits against Ringling after the fire, working through the night, and attaching the assets of the circus. Ringling was not allowed to move any equipment, stock, animals, or rail cars out of Connecticut. Claim amounts quickly exceeded \$500,000.

To protect the rights of the injured and the estates of the dead, the Hartford bar formulated a plan for allowing the circus to leave Hartford. Judge John Hamilton King approved the proposed temporary receivership, with attorney Edward Rogin chosen as receiver. Rogin took control of the books, assets, and debts of the circus, and in turn separate future circus fire-related attachments against Ringling were prevented. All existing liens were released, and a three-member arbitration board was established to review all future claims before being submitted to the receiver for payment, out of court. Ringling opposed the plan at first, but eventually agreed to accept Rogin as the receiver. The circus genuinely wanted to compensate the victims of the fire, regardless of legal liability, and the receivership plan made it possible for the show to eventually resume operations – the only way it could possibly compensate all those who suffered losses.



This view looking west across the center ring shows the destructive power of the fire.

Robert Good photograph, Circus World Museum

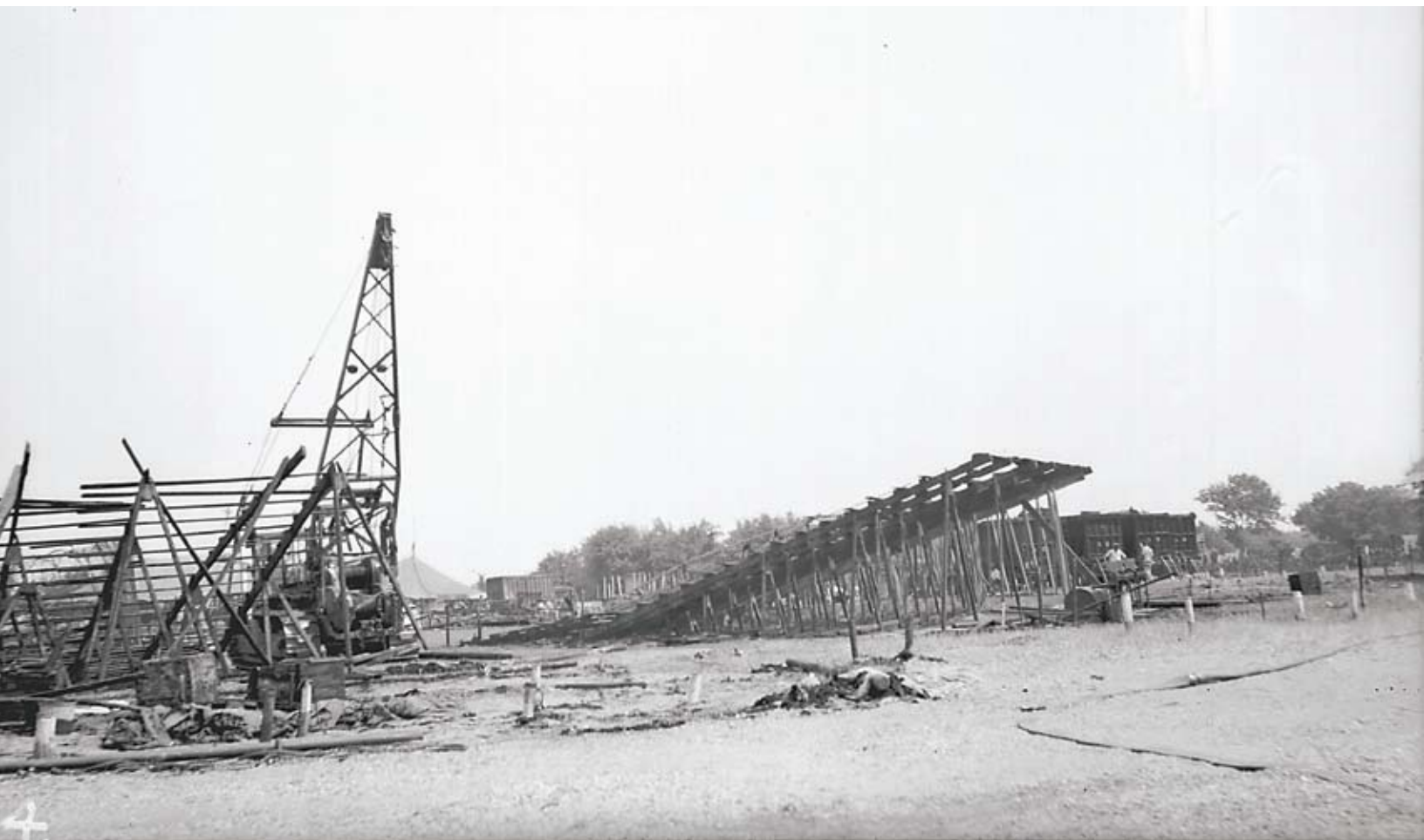
Claimants were given until July 6, 1945 to submit their claims; smaller claims were handled directly by the circus, while all other claims were submitted to the arbitration board, with the appropriate affidavits. The board reviewed and approved or denied the legitimacy and the amounts of the claims, since liability had already been determined. A total of 551 claims were submitted to the arbitrators, with only 35 denied. The approved claims totaled just under \$4 million, and Ringling would make regular payments toward the claims, with the last of the settlements paid in full in August 1950.

With the receivership plan in place and bond of \$500,000 posted by Ringling, Judge King issued an order releasing the assets of the circus and the trains left the city on July 15. Several circus employees had to remain in Hartford for further questioning, but the bulk of the show began the three-day, 1,300 mile run to Sarasota, Florida. Ringling's directors had begun working on plans for the show to return to the road in August, and props and equipment were rebuilt quickly. The defendants' trials were postponed enabling them to return to Sarasota to help get the show back on the road. The circus, without a big top, left Sarasota on July 30, headed for

the Rubber Bowl in Akron, Ohio, for the circus' first performance after the fire. The show continued with performances in open-air arenas and stadiums.

Early in the evening of July 6, only a few hours after the blaze, Commissioner Hickey, in his capacity as State Fire Marshal, initiated an on-site investigation to determine the origin and cause of the fire. Interviews and questioning began at 11:00 P.M. and continued throughout the night. Five Ringling men were arrested on charges of manslaughter: Vice-President James Haley, General Manager George Smith, Boss Canvasman Leonard Aylesworth, Chief Electrician Edward Versteeg, along with Superintendent of Trucks and Tractors David Blanchfield. Also accused, but not arrested, were seat-men William Caley and Samuel Clark, who may have been confused with John Cook, Caley's fellow seat-man under the southwest bleachers. Clark was a seat-man, under the south grandstand, and he ran out of the big top as soon as he noticed the fire. Charges against Clark were later dropped.

On the Saturday night after the fire, July 8, undercover detectives from the State Police Department spent the evening in the bar of the Bond Hotel in Hartford, mingling with



The fire began behind the southwest bleachers located to the right of the main entrance in this view of the ruins looking southeast.

Robert Good photograph, Circus World Museum

Ringling employees. The detectives listened in on conversations; much of the talk that they overheard was from angry circus workers who were upset by the treatment they were receiving from residents of the community. Some were critical of Hartford's fire department, which was one of only a few in the cities on the route that did not protect the circus grounds, and of a press report blaming the circus workers for caring more about their animals and equipment than for human lives. One worker told of breaking the cameras of several amateur photographers taking pictures during the fire. Nothing overheard by the undercover detectives warranted any further investigation.

On July 18, 1944, former circus employee Roy Tuttle was brought to Maine General Hospital in Portland, 200 miles from Hartford, with severe burns on his legs and arms. Tuttle was known around Portland as homeless and prone to apoplectic fits, and he had occasionally done odd jobs. He joined the circus in Portland a week before the fire and travelled with the show to Providence and Hartford. When the big top caught fire on July 6, he ran to help, blacked-out near one of the animal runways and woke up in a nearby field where he spent the night. He started hitchhiking to Maine the next morning and when the pain from his burns became

unbearable, he located a body of water to sit in for relief, fully clothed, which led to his burns becoming infected. A Connecticut investigator was sent to Portland to question the hospitalized man, but no evidence was found to consider Tuttle a suspect.

On July 17, Hartford's Mayor Mortensen appointed a Board of Inquiry to investigate the circus fire and report back to him how the City officials and employees performed. The Board was to review ordinances and regulations and conduct interviews, and to thoroughly investigate each aspect of the City's involvement before, during and after the disaster. In the Board's report which was released on November 17, 1944, the Hartford Police and Fire Department responses after the fire were applauded, as was the coordinated effort of all City departments involved in the efforts after the fire. However, the Board criticized communication between the City departments, noting that there was no coordination between them before the fire. The licenses that the circus paid for afforded the show no protection or consideration by the departments issuing them, aside from use of the space. Since no rules or ordinances appear to have been broken, the Board suggested immediate legislation to correct the problems and offered suggestions for improving communi-



George W. Smith, James Haley, Edward "Whitey" Versteeg, Leonard Aylesworth and David "Deacon" Blanchfield were found liable for the deaths and injuries suffered during the horrible circus fire. Connecticut State Library photo courtesy of Michael Skidgell

cations, as well as ways to prevent another similar tragedy from happening on City-owned property.

Also in November 1944, Hartford's Board of Health collected information from the hospitals and reported the casualty numbers. There were 168 dead, including a collection of mismatched parts, and an additional 484 persons injured. Of the injured survivors, 140 required hospitalization. Dozens of Ringling employees were injured, none seriously and none killed, and most sought treatment from the circus' travelling doctor rather than care at the Hartford hospitals. Few felt welcome outside of the confines of the circus grounds as public scorn for the circus began to develop.

Hartford County Coroner Frank E. Healy held an inquest, reviewed evidence and photographs, and interviewed circus personnel, City officials and employees, patrons of the circus, and other witnesses. His report, released January 11, 1945, was critical of the circus employees and their practices. Coroner Healy found Ringling managers James Haley, George Smith, Edward Versteeg and David Blanchfield guilty of reckless conduct, as well as seat-men William

Caley and Samuel Clark. The coroner charged Aylesworth for deserting his post without leaving anyone in supervision of the seat-men, and Versteeg was charged for not properly distributing the fire extinguishers. Haley and Smith's charges were for being the men with the top authority on the circus grounds. President Robert Ringling was not in Hartford on July 6, allowing him to avoid being held responsible.

Commissioner Hickey, as the State's fire marshal, also released his investigation report to the State's Attorney, on January 11, 1945. Circus workers, City employees, policemen, firemen, and patrons of the circus were among the 146 witnesses called to appear before Hickey for questioning. His report was critical of the Hartford Fire Department for not inspecting the circus grounds and not detailing any firefighters or apparatus to the scene. Hickey identified the origin of the fire as being in the southwest corner of the main tent, behind the bleachers, and his determination of the cause of the fire was an unidentified smoker who tossed a lit cigarette from the seats above, igniting the dry grass at the base of the big top sidewall. Like Officer McAuliffe's



Most of those who died in the fire had been watching the performance from the reserved seat sections on the north side of the tent. Many who tried to escape in front of these seats were blocked by the two wild animal chutes that had been placed across the hippodrome track.

Robert Good photograph, Circus World Museum

testimony about the tossed cigarette, Ringling usher and seat-man Kenneth Gwinnell and Neil Todd's testimonies resonated with Hickey. Gwinnell had testified that the only logical cause of the fire was a thrown match or cigarette, and Todd stated that he had put out dozens of fires from his post under the seats during the 1944 season alone. Hickey made selective reference to both of these men's testimonies in his report, disregarding considerable testimony to the contrary. He concluded that no evidence was found to indicate that the fire was arson.

The Commissioner's report was especially critical of the circus for its lack of fire prevention equipment, insufficient personnel to handle an emergency, allowing exits to be blocked by the animal runways, and failure to replace the men on fire watch, the seat-men, with replacements when they were called on for other duties.

The fact that Aylesworth left his seat-men unsupervised when he left the circus grounds for Springfield was also noted in the report as a contributing factor. Evidence collected from the circus grounds for Hickey's investigation included two pieces of burned canvas believed to be from the side-wall, pieces of canvas from the dressing tent, the menagerie which had not been set up in Hartford, the men's toilet enclosure, three burned seating jacks, and a piece of the animal runway.

The circus defendants pleaded "no contest" to the

charges of involuntary manslaughter, effectively admitting guilt, believing that any sentences imposed on them would be suspended considering that the circus had accepted responsibility for restitution to the victims and those who suffered. Sentences were imposed on the circus men in February 1945, and all but one was stayed until April to allow the show to prepare for the upcoming season.

General Manager George W. Smith and Boss Canvasman Leonard S. Aylesworth were sentenced to terms of two to seven years in the State Prison, later amended by the judge to a minimum of one year and a day and a maximum of five years. Both men, critical to the operation of the circus, had their sentences stayed until June 7, 1945, and were released the following February after serving the minimum time, with time off for good behavior. James Haley, First Vice President and the only Director of the company on the grounds during the July 6 performance, received a sentence of one to five years in the State Prison, later changed to the same sentence as Smith and Aylesworth. Haley began serving his time in April after the show was readied for the 1945 season. He was released after serving eight months and 17 days.

Edward Versteeg and William Caley were sentenced to one year in County Jail. Caley's sentence was the only one not stayed and he began serving his sentence immediately. Versteeg's sentence was stayed to allow him to prepare the show for the upcoming season, and he went to jail in April



When Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey began its tented season in Washington, D. C. in 1945, officials tested the new fireproofed canvas to confirm it could not easily be ignited.

Michael Skidgell Collection

and was released with Caley in September. Caley, described as a model prisoner, was released for good behavior. Versteeg was released due to a medical condition. David Blanchfield was sentenced to six months in County Jail. The Judge later suspended Blanchfield, commending him for his honest testimony.

In March 1945, Ringling attorneys sought a suspension for the sentences of those charged, appealing to the Judge with a lengthy document defending each of the accusations made against the circus. Ringling argued that the human error of seat-man John Cook was responsible for the fire, for deserting his post under the southwest bleachers, and that the other Ringling men were innocent of the charges against them. The Judge denied Ringling's motion to suspend the sentences, but he did reduce them.

For all of the circus's subsequent outdoor performances from 1945 to 1956, it used waterproofed and fire resistant canvas, and adhered to strict requirements for exits at the expense of some seats. June of 1948 would mark Ringling's return to Connecticut, with dates in Bridgeport, Waterbury, Plainville and New London. Added safety measures were in place for the circus for this tour through Connecticut. Steel chairs were bolted to the steel platforms of newly designed metal seat wagons that replaced the flammable, painted wooden seating that proved to be fatal obstacles for many at the Hartford fire. The animal runways that prevented doz-

ens from reaching the exits on that fatal day were replaced by portable cages that transported the wild animals to and from the performance rings. Local and state firemen and officials were on scene during the set-up, tear-down and all performances, armed with hose lines to provide an immediate and abundant supply of water in case of a fire. From the top of each aisle in the grandstand sections were steel stairways that allowed patrons to quickly exit the tent without having to pass through the arena area. No one was allowed to smoke in the big top, this being reinforced with posted signs and the ringmaster's announcement before the show.

In May 1950, the Connecticut State Police learned of a man being held by Ohio authorities, Robert Dale Segee, accused of setting some fires in Circleville, Ohio three years earlier. During initial questioning, Segee had admitted committing numerous crimes throughout New England, including setting the Hartford circus fire. Connecticut detectives were sent to Ohio to interview Segee regarding his knowledge of the circus fire, but they were denied access to Segee, with Ohio authorities explaining that a psychiatric evaluation was ordered for Segee and that a doctor had requested that he not be interviewed or agitated while he waited for his hospital stay. While Segee was kept at Lima State Hospital over the next few months, Connecticut detectives began investigating the crimes in Maine and New Hampshire that Segee had confessed to Ohio authorities.

Segee appeared to have had a rough childhood in the Portland, Maine area, having moved from house to house with his family, and endured abuse from his father and brothers. The entire family, including Robert, was considered undesirable by their acquaintances who were interviewed. After school let out in June 1944, Segee worked for his father's house-wrecking business in Portland and had a fight with his brothers. The fourteen-year-old Segee ran away and joined the circus; Ringling was in town and he found work with the show. Those who knew him remembered Robert coming back a couple weeks later with burns on his hand and boasting about each of his adventures. He said he had helped rescue people from the fire, that he had "beat up" a man who was stealing from the dead, and how he had had relations with the daughter of one of the circus executives. Segee's friends and family knew he had a wild imagination and told many unbelievable tales, and that he often complained of dreams and hallucinations.

Lima State Hospital released Segee from its care in October 1950, with doctors declaring him to be poorly edu-

cated and below normal intelligence, although sane, neurotic and compulsive. Their studies indicated that Segee had been punished as a child by his father, with fire, and that he abused fire after dissatisfying sexual situations. Segee had both admitted and denied involvement in the fires for which he was accused, including the Hartford circus fire. His doctors were inclined to believe that even if he did not commit the crimes, he was capable of them and potentially dangerous. He pled guilty to the Circleville fires and was sentenced to four-to-40 years at Mansfield Reformatory in Ohio. He spent much of his next 40 years in and out of prison and mental hospitals. Commissioner Hickey declared, after review of the Ohio investigation report and the reports of his own detectives, that there was no evidence that warranted an arrest of Segee for involvement in the Hartford circus fire, and that if Segee had set the fire, they would not be able to prosecute him since he was 14 years old at the time and considered a minor in Connecticut.

In March 1991, Connecticut's Department of Public Safety Commissioner ordered the origin and cause of the



Hartford Circus Fire to be re-examined. Two years later, in March 1993, the investigators had pored over all available documents, photographs, and evidence available to them, and arranged an interview with the aged, poverty-stricken Robert Segee at the home he shared with his daughter's family in Columbus, Ohio. Segee was very talkative and friendly with the detectives in the recorded interviews, and almost 50 years after the event, his recollection of July 6, 1944 during the two-day interview was that he had finished his work setting spotlights for the show, and went to a theater in Hartford to see a movie. On the bus ride back to the circus grounds people were talking about the big top being on fire, and by the time he returned, everything had burned to the ground.

Segee also said his confession to Ohio police in 1950

Aerial photographs of the Hartford fire scene revealed the vastness of the devastation. The midway and side show tent are at the right in this view, the undamaged dressing room tent is at the left.

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had been coerced during a vigorous interrogation, and he felt like the Ohio investigators and doctors had brainwashed him. He said he felt like a failure that day for leaving the grounds and not being there to help. Segee told investigators that there were many disgruntled circus employees who had not been paid for some time, and someone might have started the fire with a magnifying glass. It was apparent that the prime time to interview Segee as an arson suspect had long passed. Detectives did not feel that they gained any additional, useful information about the cause and origin of the fire, and they did not believe there was sufficient evidence to bring any charges against Segee.

The investigators continued with their work, and having reviewed old, conflicting reports on the possibility of a cigarette igniting grass they looked to forensic scientist Dr. Henry Lee of Connecticut's State Forensic Lab to review the case and provide his opinion. Dr. Lee and his forensic team conducted numerous tests of burning cigarettes in various types of grass, indoors and outdoors, and determined that a cigarette alone would not set the grass on fire. Charring and smoke were produced, but ignition was not achieved during the tests. Lee's conclusion was that a cigarette did not start the grass on fire, as Commissioner Hickey had concluded in his 1945 report, but if other combustibles were present in the men's toilet enclosure, the conditions would have been different. He believed the fire was accidental, and not likely arson.

Lacking solid evidence, the re-investigation case was officially closed in June 1993. The investigative team's conclusion was that the origin of the fire was inside or just outside of the men's toilet enclosure, between the enclosure and the big top. A carelessly discarded cigarette tossed into the grass at the base of the sidewall or seating supports was ruled out, although it was determined that it would be impossible to rule out all possible accidental causes. There was no indication of arson, and Robert Segee had ultimately denied involvement. Thus, the cause of the fire was listed as "undetermined." **Bw**



About the Author

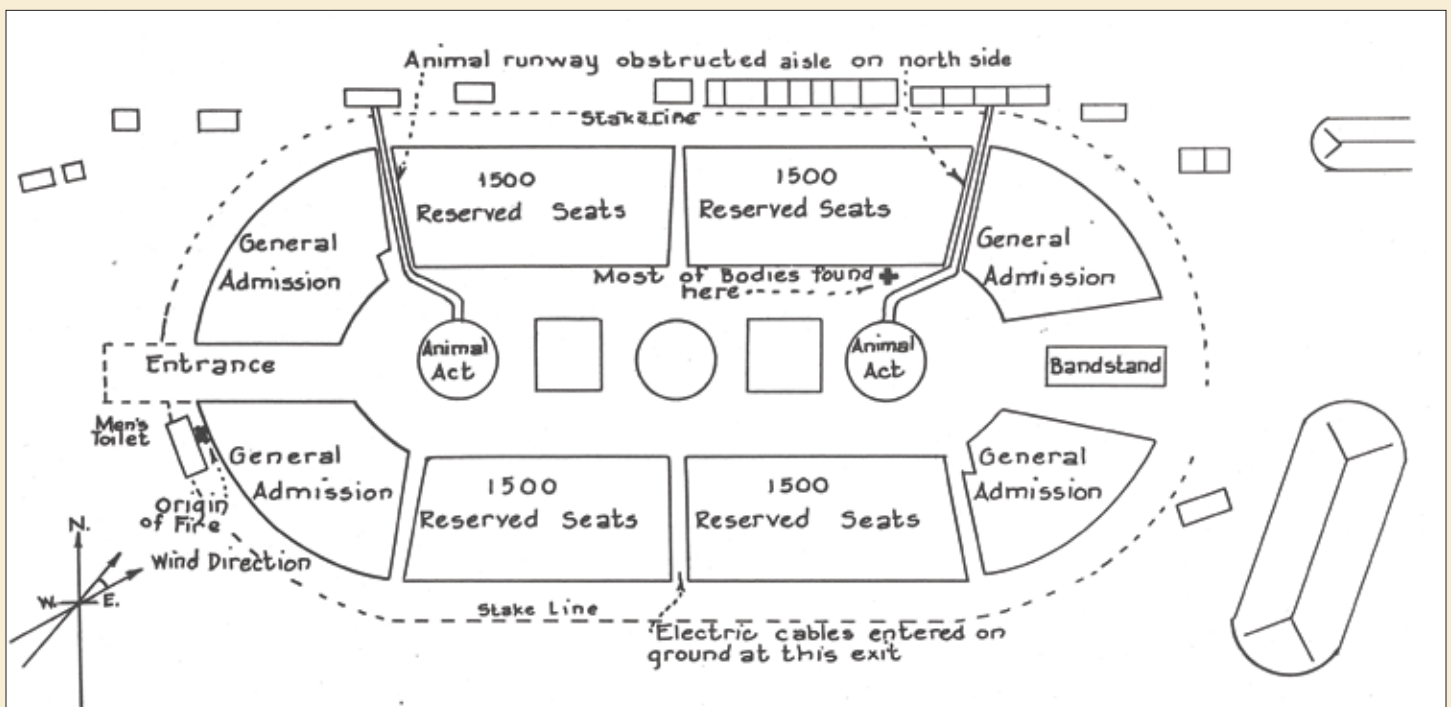
Author Michael R. Skidgell was born in Hartford 22 years after the Hartford Circus Fire and has lived in Connecticut ever since, currently residing in Plainville with his son, two dogs and a cat. Mike has been researching the circus fire since 2001, collecting items and information about the tragedy and sharing it all on his website, www.circusfire1944.com, including biographies of each victim, survivor accounts, and a massive collection of images and videos.

Hartford Circus Holocaust

by Warren Y. Kimball

This article originally appeared in the July 1944 National Fire Protection Association Quarterly. It was published about one week after the disaster, following Warren Kimball's on-site inspection of the fire scene and his subsequent investigation. It is recognized that Kimball's reference to the fire as a "holocaust" may today seem not fully appropriate

in light of the knowledge of the atrocities of the Holocaust that emerged during and after World War II. However, this reprint remains true to the author's original words. Illustrations and captions, unless otherwise noted, are the same as those that accompanied the original article. All annotated endnotes are those of the Bandwagon Editor.



This plan, drawn after an examination of the ruins, shows the approximate arrangements, but may not be accurate in all details. The small squares beyond the side of the tent were animal cage wagons. Many other circus wagons in front of the main entrance and elsewhere on the grounds are not shown on this plan. At right were the performers' [dressing] tents not involved in the fire.

National Fire Prevention Association

Danger from fire was far from the minds of some 7,000 happy patrons attending "The Greatest Show on Earth" at the City-owned circus grounds on the outskirts of Hartford, Connecticut, on the hot sunny afternoon of July 6, 1944. About twenty minutes after the matinee started, a "flash fire" occurred which caused fatal injuries to the 163 persons, mostly women and children. Sixty-three of the dead were children under 15 years of age. Well over 200 other patrons were confined to hospitals as a result of burns, and some 50 or 60 circus employees were treated by their own physician. Some of the critically injured patrons may yet succumb.¹

Hartford, Connecticut, the "Insurance Capital," has for years carried the proud boast of the "best governed city in America." Just a few weeks prior to the fire, the city won the grand award in the Inter-Chamber Fire Waste Contest. This was in a large measure due to the outstanding work of the Fire Prevention Bureau under City Fire Marshal Henry G. Thomas. As an overcrowded war industry center, probably no city has been more aggressive in carrying out fire safety measures, such as installation of adequate exits from various types of lodgings in places of public assembly. It is said that the War Production Board officials had recently complained that Hartford was using up more critical iron in providing fire escapes than any other city, but when shown the need by the Fire Prevention Bureau the necessary priorities were granted.

The Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Combined Shows had carried on their great show in many states and for many years with conditions substantially the same as those which resulted in the Hartford tragedy. The seating arrangements, the performances, the arrangement of the "big top" were all "routine." The circus had visited a number of other New England cities in the weeks prior to the fire. It had visited Hartford in previous years. The set-up had been the same and local officials in every case had welcomed the circus without questioning. The circus was an institution older than the building codes of most cities and much older than the comparatively new development of municipal fire prevention bureaus. City officials everywhere enjoyed the circus. It brought them their youth again for an afternoon. They had no doubt welcomed the circus as small boys and helped "water the elephants." The circus was an old friend.

The circus was pitched on a City-owned circus lot. It was late arriving and there was some haste in getting ready for the afternoon show.² A City Building Department inspector was on the scene before the stands were up and issued a permit. Apparently, this was considered routine and it was stated the inspection was made to cover zoning ordinance requirements. There is no indication that the inspector gave any consideration to such matters as width of exits or flameproofing of the canvas. The Fire Prevention Bureau of Fire Department received no notice from the Building Department regarding the issuance of the permit and had no official notification that the circus was in operation. Neither did

the Fire Department, under Chief John C. King, have a fire fighting detail at the circus until after the tragedy, although the Police Department did have a detail at the scene.

Preparations for fire safety at the circus would appear to have been somewhat meagre considering the magnitude of the crowds handled and the fire hazards which obviously were present. The circus equipment included four all-purpose water tank trucks having pumps powered by a power take-off and supplying 50 feet of 2-inch hose having a ½-inch nozzle tip.³ These pumps produced a nozzle pressure of approximately 58 pounds, which would give a discharge of about 56 gallons per minute. Three of the tank trucks had a capacity of 1,000 gallons each and the other had 800 gallons capacity. During each performance, there were two circus hands detailed to each truck and these were in operation during the fire, but the circus employed no professional firemen and had no fire marshal or fire chief on its staff. There is evidence that the circus equipment may have been of some use in extinguishing fire in the blazing stands near the point of origin, but it was obviously inconsequential as a means of preventing the loss of life.⁴ The only other private firefighting equipment that was available for quick use were water buckets. A number of fire extinguishers carried by circus vehicles were not distributed about the tent for protection of the show.

The Connecticut State Police Commissioner, Col. Edward J. Hickey, who is ex-officio State Fire Marshal, was entertaining a party of children at the circus on the afternoon of the tragedy. He is conducting the official investigation of the tragedy, with a personal determination that such a fire shall never occur again in the State of Connecticut.

Description of the Tent

The huge tent where the fire occurred was approximately 425 feet long and 180 feet wide and covering an area of approximately 74,000 square feet or better than 1½ acres.⁵ It was the usual type of large circus tent supported by a large number of heavy poles held by guy ropes secured to a double row of stakes approximately 15 feet outside the tent. The largest poles had a maximum diameter of 12 inches. The outer circumference of the tent contained a tier of stands having a seating capacity of 9,048 persons. This was distributed between 6,048 reserved seats, running along the north and south sides of the tent, and 3,000 general admission seats located at the two ends of the tent. During the afternoon performance when the fire occurred, there were 6,789 paid admissions, indicating that some 7,000 patrons were in the tent. There is no indication of the number of performers or employees actually in the tent at the time of the fire, but the circus had a staff of over 1,300 persons, as compared to normal peacetime complement of about 1,600 employees.⁶

Running along the center axis of the tent and separated from the spectators by the wide aisle by which the patrons reached their seats, were three show rings. Between the show

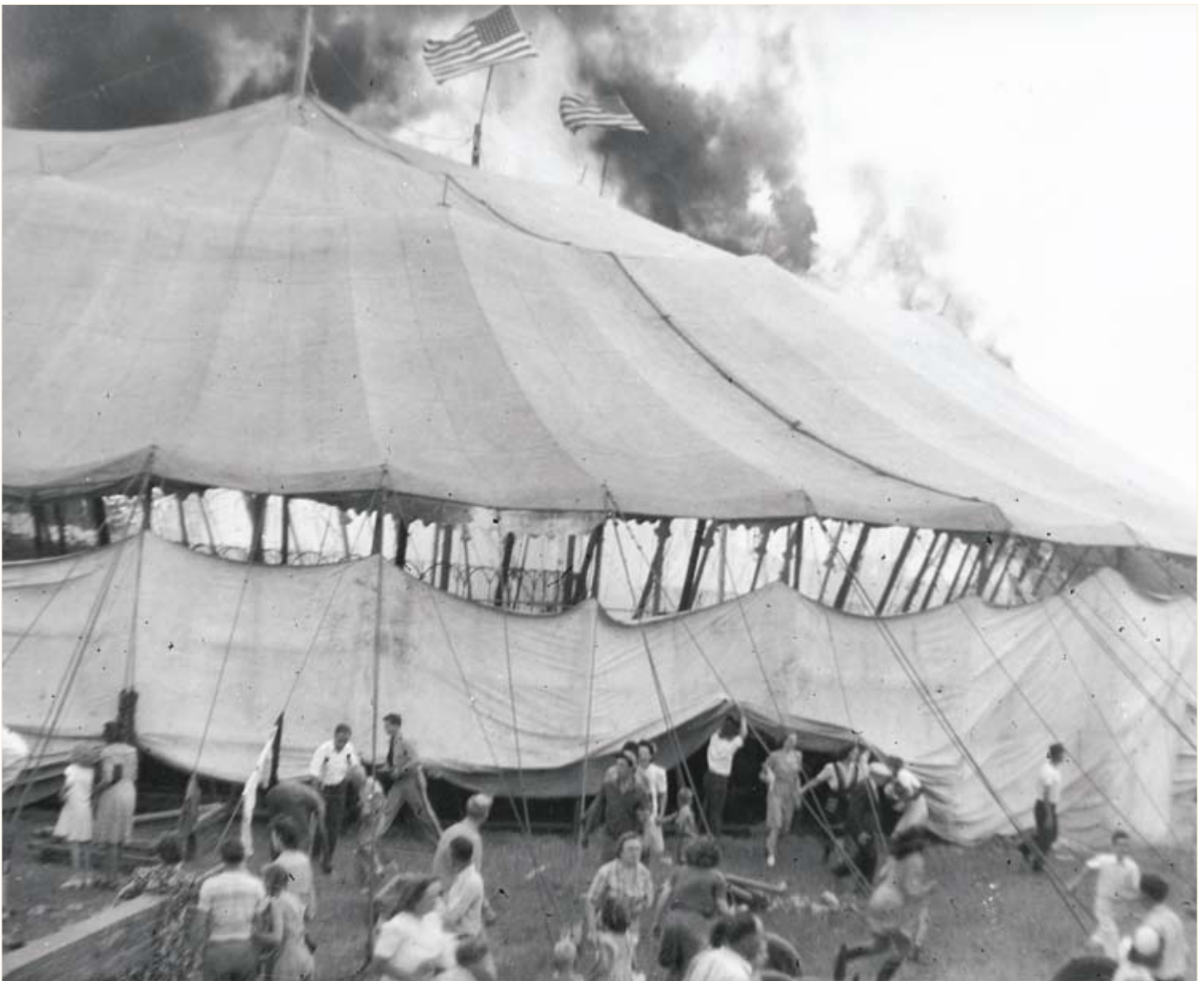
rings were two square platforms used for additional acts.

The seating stands were reported to be at 10½ feet maximum height at the rear of each stand and there were 16 to 18 rows of seats, depending on the type of accommodation.

At the time of the fire, wild animal acts had just been completed in the rings at the east and west ends of the tent. Temporary steel cages were erected in these rings for the animal acts. Animals were brought into these rings through long temporary cage runways, called “chutes” in circus parlance. These extended to animal conveyance trucks [wagons] located north of the main tent. It was one of these animal cage runways extending across the main north aisle that blocked the escape of many of the spectators as they fled in an easterly direction away from the fire. These animals chute cages appeared to vary in height from about three to four feet. They were two to three feet wide.

Exit Arrangements

It is understood that the Hartford Building Department records indicated nine means of exit from the tent. This was confirmed by N.F.P.A. staff investigation at the scene of the fire. The main entrance at the west end was a little over 20 feet wide on the inside of the stands and widened out to something over 30 feet at the point of egress, which was under an entrance canopy. At the opposite or east end was located the bandstand with an exit on each side of the stand. These exits were better than 14 feet wide at the narrowest point and widened to nearly 19 feet at the point of egress. These were the only really commodious exits from the circus tent. On both the north and south sides there were three minor exits used primarily by performers, but available to the public. These exits averaged 9 or 10 feet wide at the ringside, but



Many people jumped off the back of the stands, or crawled down between the seats and escaped under the canvas sidewalls. Perhaps this possibility has been the excuse for grossly inadequate exits in circuses, but this fire shows the fallacy of relying on anything but standard exits.

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narrowed down to as little as 5 feet 2 inches at the point of egress. The center of these exits on the south side was used to bring electric cables along the ground into the tent. At the time of the fire the east and west exits on the north side were occupied by the animal chutes, leaving unobstructed only a single exit having an egress width of 5 feet 2 inches to serve two sections of grandstand each approximately 125 feet long and having approximately 3,000 total seating capacity. The runway chute cages that obstructed the main north aisle and two of the exits on the north side were bridged by a stile five feet wide and five steps high. These stiles proved utterly inadequate to handle the panic-stricken crowd.

Adequacy of Exits

As is well known to most N.F.P.A. members, the Building Exits Code of the National Fire Protection Association has for many years been the life safety standard for the protection of public gatherings and other crowded occupancies against fire and panic hazards. The Building Exits Code was prepared by the N.F.P.A. Committee on Safety to Life, a representative group of experts in this field. While many persons may not have thought of applying the Code to anything as unsubstantial as a tent, this fire is evidence that adequate exits are needed for tents and other temporary structure

serving large crowds.

The Building Exits Code requires one 22-inch unit of exit for each 100 persons accommodated. On this basis, the circus would have required 91 units of exit width, whereas our study of the circus grounds after the fire showed a maximum of 43 units of exit width actually provided. At the time of the fire, these limited exit facilities were further reduced by the obstruction of two of the north exits by the animal chute cages. The effect of this was to block off two sections of reserve seats, having approximately 3,000 seating capacity, and leaving only one narrow exit which was less than three 22-inch units in width, and thus could not be expected to take care of more than 10 per cent of the persons isolated in the northern grandstands. Incidentally, it should be pointed out that the N.F.P.A. Building Exits Code requirements are considered to be quite lenient because they are designed for more substantial structures than tents and many cities might wish to have more stringent requirements in the case of temporary structures or tents.

One factor that should not be overlooked in any appraisal of exit facilities at the circus was that the main exit aisle in the front of the stands, some 26 to 27 feet wide at the narrowest point, was not available to the audience during much of the performance. Not only was this main track



Site of the main entrance. A section of one of the animal chutes is in the foreground.

Acme photo from Michael Skidgell collection

blocked temporarily by the animal chutes, but it is in use by the performers through much of the show. The grand parade circles the track, it is used by the parade of elephants, by chariot races, wild west riders and numerous other attractions. In short, except at the beginning and the end of the show the spectators are largely kept behind the metal railing that circles the arena. There is room behind this railing for the movement of only a very narrow file of persons in the limited space in front of the stands. This situation conflicts with Building Exit Code requirements that exits be unobstructed at all times. Likewise, the fact that several of the exits were much smaller at the point of egress than was indicated by their dimension at the ringside is also a further conflict with good exit arrangement.

Story of the Fire

The fire began on or near the ground at the outside canvas immediately to the south of and about 20 feet from the

main exit. The point where the fire started was between the outside canvas of the main tent and the canvas enclosure for the men's toilet which backed up to the main tent at that point. The grass is said to have been dry from the heat and dust common to circus grounds, and might easily have been ignited by a match or cigarette. However, some grass within a few feet of the fire area did not appear to be burned, although trees 50 to 60 feet from the fire showed scorched foliage.

When first noticed, the flame was 5 or 6 feet high. Although standard fire extinguishers or a small hose line immediately applied might have conceivably controlled a fire of this size without difficulty, it had already spread enough to make 3 buckets of water thrown on it ineffective.

As the fire rapidly increased and hit the edge of the top canvas, the flame was about 2 feet wide at the point of contact. A gust of wind from the southwest then drove the fire across the underside of the tent and almost instantly the



The burning of the circus tent in Hartford, July 6, 1944 where people were killed, mostly women and children, and injured. The flames flashed over the paraffin treated canvas with incredible rapidity.

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entire canvas was enveloped in flames. The ropes holding the supporting poles were burned through all most at once, allowing the great poles to fall among the panic-stricken throng and causing several fatalities.

It is reported by several spectators that the majority of the crowd did not leave immediately at the first sign of the fire. Several persons seated near the point of origin are said to have walked the entire length of the tent to the further exit before the panic occurred. It is said that at the outset the crowd viewed the fire incredulously, thought it part of the show, or believed it to be an incipient fire that would quickly be controlled. The delay, if only momentary, may have been fatal to some of those who a few seconds later were in the panic-stricken mob seeking to escape.

As previously pointed out, the animal runway chutes temporarily blocked the best means of exit for most of the seats on the north side of the tent.⁷ As the people ran down the aisle toward the eastern end of the tent to escape the flames, they piled up against the animal runway at that end. The steps over these runways proved utterly inadequate. Attempts to climb over the steel cage bars were largely futile for women in high heeled shoes and for small children. Most of the bodies of those who failed to reach the outside were found piled four deep against this cage obstruction in the main north aisle.

Another cause of confusion and injury was the excessive use of loose folding chairs in substantial portions of the

reserved seats section.⁸ This was contrary to provisions of the N.F.P.A. Building Exits Code which specifies that where more than 200 seats are provided they shall be securely fastened to the floor. As the people dashed out, they shoved the loose chairs down the tiers ahead of them. Those in the middle tiers stumbled and fell across the piles of loose chairs blocking their escape. Persons in the first five or six rows got out more easily. Those in the back jumped the 10 or 12 feet to the ground to escape under the canvas.

Most of the fatalities were due to severe burns as the blazing canvas fell on the crowd, igniting flimsy summer clothing. This is in contrast to the Cocoanut Grove fire in Boston where many of the deaths were by suffocation.⁹ It is probable that some of the deaths were due to crushing by the panic-stricken mob, even though burns quickly followed. The fire appeared to be quite spotty in character, as some seats and poles showed unburned paint, while adjacent seats were deeply charred and some of the wooden stands, particularly on the south side, were almost completely consumed.

Fire Fighting Operations

Once the fire started, it was obviously impossible for fire fighters to reach the scene in time to prevent a tragedy. As a matter of fact, had the entire fire department been stationed at the circus grounds there is likelihood that the outcome would [not] have been any different once the top canvas became ignited.



The grim ruins of the 1½-acre tent. One of the animal chutes leading to the large cage may be seen at the left center. Most of the loss of life occurred in front of the stands at the left. (This is a slightly different view than the original which could not be located.)

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Calls to the fire department were given promptly by an off-duty fireman attending the circus, a police radio car, and a resident of a near-by house. Three box alarms were sounded almost simultaneously. These calls brought an immediate response of seven engine and three ladder companies. The nearest fire company was approximately one-half mile from the tent.

The nearest hydrant was approximately 300 feet from the front entrance of the tent. Other hydrants were spaced about 500 feet apart along the street leading to the circus grounds and on adjacent streets. Some six hydrants were used. There were no fire hydrants in the circus grounds.

Fire Marshal Thomas, who is also First Deputy Chief of the Hartford Fire Department, was the first chief officer on the scene. He reported that within ten minutes from the start of the fire the canvas was completely consumed, the poles were down and the fire fighters' chief task was to extinguish the blazing stands and extricate the dead. Examination of the ruins indicates that the fire department devoted its first attention to extinguishing the fire in the area where the people were trapped in an effort to save all possible lives.

Cause of the Fire

As soon as the fire was under control, Mayor Mortensen of Hartford authorized the Fire Marshal to conduct an investigation of the fire. This was started immediately and continued at the circus grounds until 11 P.M., when the investigation was transferred to the State Fire Marshall's office. Newspapers have reported that the cause of the fire has been determined, but this information as well as many other technical details is being held for a presentation to the State's Attorney. However, the point of origin is definitely known and the fire is generally attributed to careless smoking.

At the point where the fire started the sidewall canvas was supported by a wooden framework.¹⁰ This framework was in the shape of an inverted V of approximately 2 by 4-inch timbers. This was braced by a sill of about 1 by 4-inch board mortised into the uprights at either side. At the left hand side of this inverted V the structural members had been charred through over an area about 5 inches long. This was considered unusual as it showed an intensity of fire much more serious than evidenced at other places close to the point of origin. It has been observed that the seats nearest where the fire started were the least damaged. It is reasoned that the wooden structural members should have been less flammable than the sidewall canvas which was so quickly consumed, and therefore this portion of the framework should not have been subjected to the intense localized exposure indicated by this evidence of severe heat at the immediate spot where the fire started.

It has also been observed that a match or cigarette could have smoldered for several minutes in the dried grass at the point of origin before the fire extended to the sidewall canvas and attained sufficient headway to attract attention.

It was recalled during the investigation that the same circus had suffered a serious fire of believed incendiary origin when a menagerie tent was destroyed at Cleveland, Ohio, on August 4, 1942. Negro roustabouts had reportedly confessed setting this previous fire after being discharged from employment. However, a number of circus hands questioned after the Hartford fire reportedly expressed the opinion that the Cleveland fire was due to a locomotive spark or some other external cause. Electricity has been ruled out as a possible cause of the Hartford tragedy, as cables entered the tent at a point remote from where the fire started.

However, under normal circumstances the immediate cause of this fire seems immaterial, as the flame once started by any common cause of fire could have had the same results once the highly flammable canvas ignited, irrespective of the source of ignition.

Flameproofing of Canvas

The practically new canvas of the "big top" had no flameproofing. It had been processed against water by the use of paraffin applied with gasoline as a solvent. This was done late in April. It was said to have been the time-honored method of waterproofing used by the circus. The gasoline solvent undoubtedly had evaporated prior to the date of the fire, although possibly some petroleum residues may have remained with the paraffin waterproofing. It is reported that a circus "big top" had been destroyed in a previous fire in 1912 at Sterling, Illinois, when sparks from an exposure fire ignited the paraffin coated canvas. Fortunately, on that occasion the fire occurred shortly before the show and the crowd was refused admittance to the tent. On March 5, 1929, a huge tent housing the Los Angeles Auto Show was destroyed by a fire of unknown origin, which caused a \$1,500,000 loss. Some 2,500 patrons, who represented only a small fraction of the reported capacity of the tent, escaped without fatalities.

It is probable that one aftermath of this fire will be the adoption of ordinances requiring the flameproofing of tents used for various circus shows, and carnivals. While no treatment of combustible material such as canvas can make it actually "fireproof," it is possible to apply flameproofing chemicals so that the canvas not previously treated with wax or paraffin, cannot be ignited by the flame of a match or any similar minor source of ignition. The practical difficulty with most flameproofing treatments has been that the chemicals would dissolve in water and after the continued exposure to the weather they would be washed out. This difficulty has been overcome by the certain manufactures of flameproofed canvas who combine effective waterproofing with flameproofing and produce a product which retains its fire-resistant properties for the normal life of the canvas. It is reported that such treated canvas is used extensively by the Army and Navy; it is also used for awnings, and for tarpaulins to protect railroad shipments.

Such flameproofed canvas is entirely different in its fire behavior from ordinary canvas used for tents. Ordinary canvas is frequently treated with paraffin or some other waterproofing compound which tends to increase its naturally high flammability. The only practical method of determining the flameproof qualities of canvas is to make a fire test on a sample. This would involve cutting out sections of the tent for a test, necessitating subsequent patching. It is not surprising that fire inspectors have not made such tests on circus tents which are customarily erected only a few hours before they are used for public performances.

Underwriters' Laboratories, Inc. list flameproof fabrics made by two different manufacturers. These fabrics are chemically treated. The product is comparatively difficult to ignite and does not propagate flame, even when in drafts, beyond the area exposed to the source of ignition. Smoldering combustion which occurs on ignition, may spread in folds of such fabrics, but does not extend beyond the area exposed to ignition.

Damage and Loss

Estimates of loss to circus property varied from \$200,000 to \$300,000, including destruction of the main tent said to be valued at \$50,000. According to reports, the circus was extensively insured against both fire damage and liability, although the full amount of coverage has not yet been reported. The City of Hartford has attached all of the circus property in the city not destroyed by fire, except the menag-

erie animals (which are hearty eaters) in an effort to prevent removal of values which might be used to meet various claims. It was reported in the press that within a week of the fire papers had been served by individuals asking a total of \$497,000 in damages. Later damage claims reached \$1,100,000. The City was co-defendant with the circus in most of the actions. Judging from previous fire disasters, life insurance and social security claims in the disaster of this sort may reach a sizable sum, even though women and children, who suffered most of the casualties in Hartford fire, seldom have as much insurance protection as would be the case with an equal number of men.

Indictments

Subsequent to fire, five circus officials have been indicted on manslaughter charges, but all were released on bail amounting to \$10,000 to \$15,000 each. Hearings on these indictments have been set for July 19. It was not known whether other indictments would be returned.

Corrective Measures

Col. Edward J. Hickey, Connecticut State Fire Marshal, took prompt action to prevent similar disasters in the future. Another circus visiting the state was compelled to remove the top canvas of its main tent and a detail of 50 firemen stood by with pumpers and charged hose lines during performances.

Likewise, it is reported that Mayor Mortensen plans to



These scorched wagons on the Hartford lot provided evidence of the fire's tremendous heat.

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appoint a body of distinguished citizens to investigate the operations of the various city departments in relation to the disaster. It seems quite likely that one result will be the strengthening of the fire prevention ordinances along lines previously recommended by the Hartford Fire Prevention Bureau. More adequate staffing of the Fire Prevention Bureau is another urgent need. This important bureau, which is an adjunct of the Fire Department, has been chronically understaffed considering the large volume of inspections, records, and permits it is called upon to handle. The excellent work accomplished by the Bureau under these handicaps is largely due to the energy and devotion of the small fire prevention staff. This is a condition not alone peculiar to Hartford, as Fire Prevention Bureaus throughout the United States have had a marked curtailment as fire departments have felt the pinch of manpower since the start of the war. In a number of cities, the fire prevention staff has been completely eliminated and all inspectors have been sent back to active fire fighting.

Conclusions

Perhaps the most concise summary of lessons from this fire was that published editorially in the Hartford Times for July 12 as follows:

“To make sure that such a disaster shall not be repeated the following are absolutely essential:

1. Maximum fire-resistant treatment of material used for tents housing circuses or large gatherings of people, plus frequent inspections to assure that the treatment remains effective.
2. Provision of numerous unobstructed exits from all parts of the enclosure, regardless of how much such exits may reduce seating capacity of the grandstands.
3. Restriction, even prohibition of smoking. Already smoking is forbidden in crowded stores; it is much more necessary to forbid it in all places where large crowds gather for amusements.”

There can be a little doubt that like all great disasters, such as major fires and conflagrations, a combination of unfavorable circumstances was present to formulate a disaster. The circus had played thousands of performances under substantially similar arrangements without difficulty. It just happened that at Hartford the canvas was ignited supposedly from an accidental fire and a spot close to the main entrance at a time when the wind from the southwest was in a position to push it through the tent, and at a time when the exits for the north side of the tent were seriously obstructed.

It is, however, felt that under other circumstances the disaster might have been much worse. A few minutes prior to the start of the fire the main exit aisle was occupied by the

parade of more than thirty elephants. Had the blaze occurred at that time and sent the giant beasts terror-stricken among the audience, the toll could have been greater. Likewise, had the fire occurred at night and the crowd been forced to flee from the tent through the maze of tent pegs and ropes into the night, the loss of life might have been many times greater despite the use of numerous floodlights on the grounds.

Proper exit facilities unobstructed at all times during the performance and flameproofing of the tent canvas would have prevented this loss of life from fire and panic, although it is doubtful that a tent can ever be considered as safe for large audiences as a well-constructed exhibition building. Severe lightning and wind storms, and the danger of escaping wild animals, present a danger of panic conditions, particularly now that the public is aware of the heretofore unappreciated dangers of a circus performance. **BW**

Transcribed by Julie Parkinson

Bandwagon Editor's Notes

1. The Board of Health officially determined that 168 people died in the fire, and it issued 168 death certificates. Six victims were never identified, although one of these, “Little Miss 1565,” was proclaimed in 1993 by an arson investigator to be eight-year old Eleanor Emily Cook. However, Cook’s mother had always maintained that the girl in the morgue photo was not her daughter. Moreover, Steward O’Nan pointed out in his book *The Circus Fire* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) the improbability of 1565 actually being Eleanor Cook and the likelihood that the body of the real Miss Cook had been incorrectly claimed by another family right after the fire. The surviving records and differing interpretations suggest that the actual identity of Little Miss 1565 and the other five unidentified victims may never be determined beyond a reasonable doubt.
2. Hartford was a two-day stand. The show arrived late on July 5, forcing the cancellation of the afternoon performance. A large audience was present for the evening performance. The fire occurred the next afternoon on Thursday, July 6.
3. Records assembled by Stephen T. Flint confirm that the show did indeed have four model AC Mack trucks with water tanks on the lot in Hartford. They were 128, 130, 133 and 137. Three similar Mack trucks were in storage at the Sarasota winter quarters – 125, 129 and 138. The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey 132 AC Mack truck with a water tank mounted on its frame in the collection at Circus World Museum, was also on the Hartford lot on the fateful day in 1944. However, it has been incorrectly restored, having historically carried a box body for cargo rather than a water tank.
4. Court testimony later confirmed that water from a cir-

cus Mack truck directed by David “Deacon” Blanchfield on a pile of bodies inside one of the exits saved the lives of at least two individuals who were pulled from that pile.

5. Most sources record that the big top canvas was actually 200 x 450' (two 200-foot diameter half round end sections with five 50-foot middles), covering an area of 81,415 SF.
6. These counts of employees were inflated. The Official Report of the Connecticut Commissioner of State Police recorded the number of Ringling employees and performers in Hartford on July 6 to have been 555. Other sources have set forth that the circus had about 700 employees in 1944 including those in advance of the show and at winter quarters.
7. When the fire began, the Wallendas were about to start their act on the high-wire and Court's wild animals were exiting the steel arenas through the two chutes placed across the hippodrome track. Panto's Paradise was starting to assemble outside the east end of the tent. By the time the spec was to have started, all sections of the wild animal chutes would have been removed from the big top.
8. Eventually, the problem of the loose folding chairs was addressed by the design of the 36' long mechanical seat wagons that were first used by Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 1948. The 14 rows of chairs on these wagons were permanently attached to the platform structure below. The two long sides of the wagons folded outward and upward, and the front of the resulting surface was lowered to create the grandstand seating. Chairs were then unfolded in place. Short metal stringers were attached at the front of each unit to support the lower rows of seating. The circus had 28 of these seat wagons built. During the first three years after the fire (1945-1947) steel jacks and stringers, metal folding chairs, and unpainted fire-treated planking were used.
9. One of Boston's most popular nightspots, Cocoanut Grove caught fire on the night of November 28, 1942 resulting in 492 deaths.
10. The wooden “framework” described was actually an upper jack that supported the general admission seating in the southwest end of the tent.



Circus workers began moving equipment and reorganizing the lot as soon as the fire was over. However, this work was soon halted by authorities in an effort to preserve any surviving evidence needed for their investigations.

Circus World Museum

Artifacts from the Day of the Fire



Artifact preserved at Circus World Museum

photo by Hunter Howell

Stake Driver

The day before the big top fire, workers operated Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Stake Driver #108 to pound down stakes that anchored the tents at the Hartford lot. It was one of three mechanical stake drivers carried in 1944 – two such dual stake drivers and one single pile driver.

This steel wagon was fabricated during the winter of 1939-1940 to replace a wooden-bodied unit, also numbered 108, that had been used since about 1926. The “new” #108 first saw service during the season of 1940. Originally, the circular platform, engine and wheel apparatus were transferred from the predecessor vehicle. During 1941, this outdated machinery was replaced while the show was on the road. The new equipment included a compact gasoline motor manufactured by the Hercules Machine Company. Another significant modification was made after the 1942 season when the wagon’s wooden spoked wheels were exchanged for dual pneumatic tires.

During its early years of use, a pair of elephants drew #108 to each new driving station. In the late 1940s, D-4 Caterpillar tractors replaced the “bulls” as the towing power. Stakes were driven in a line about 15 feet out from each tent side pole, as well as midway between poles for angular wind

ropes. To drive the stakes men standing behind the wagon pulled back on the two long levers, forcing hard rubber rollers attached to the top of the levers against the flat iron bars of the heavy divers. This action raised the hammers high above the top of the stakes that were placed in the bottom of the twin shafts. When a lever was nudged forward, the roller was released causing the driving unit to fall and strike the stake. The reverberation of the gasoline engine, whirling chains and gears, and the rhythmic clanking noise made upon impact were collectively one of the most distinctive sounds heard during the morning set up.

Stake Driver #108 continued its service on the show until the tents came down in Pittsburgh in 1956 ending Ringling’s canvas era. Thereafter, it was stored at the Sarasota winter quarters. In the fall of 1959, it was selected along with other equipment and materials for the new circus museum in Wisconsin. It is one of a number of Ringling-Barnum vehicles present on the day of the Hartford fire that are now preserved at Circus World Museum, The Ringling in Sarasota, and by others across the country.

When its attached pole is folded up, the overall length of the wagon is 15’ 9”.

Cook House Flag

“Flag’s up” was the announcement that resounded across the circus lot to convey that meal service had commenced in the dining tent. A long-standing tradition on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was to identify this tent with the single word “Hotel” stenciled or sewn onto the flag raised over it.

This weathered pennant is the actual cookhouse flag that flew during the 1944 season until the terrible tragic fire. The small size of the Barbour Street lot in Hartford did not permit the use of the menagerie tent, and several support tents had to be set up in locations at some distance from the main showgrounds. The cookhouse was one of these. It was reached by a path that led through the trees to a location about a quarter of mile to the northeast of the big top. By the time the afternoon performance began on July 6, this flag had been lowered signaling that the mid-day mealtime had concluded.

This artifact measures 30" high and 42" wide.



Artifact preserved at Illinois State University Milner Library, Special Collections
photo courtesy Milner Library

Wild Animal Chute Section

No circus property on the Hartford lot in 1944 has more profound significance than this lone rusty section of one of Alfred Court's wild animal chutes that endures at the Al. Ringling Mansion in Baraboo. When placed opposite a similar piece, it created a 28-inch wide section of one of the tunnels that wild animals moved through to reach the steel arenas set up in the performance rings.

The chutes for the two wild animal acts were still in place and being used when the fire broke out. Many in the audience – mostly women and children who minutes earlier had been enjoying the circus performance – were trapped by the chutes placed across the hippodrome track adjacent to the ends of the reserved seats on the north side of the big top. Most of those who died in the fire were crammed against these steel barriers.

This artifact measures 42" high, 69" long and 14" wide. **Bw**



Artifact preserved at Al. Ringling Mansion, Baraboo, Wisconsin

photo by Hunter Howell

The Show Goes On

by Chris Berry



AFTERNOON & NIGHT
STATE
FAIR GROUNDS
WEST ALLIS

FRI. SEP.

8

SAT. SEP.

9

SUN. SEP.

10

This poster featured Kitty Clark who appeared as the mermaid in the Panto's Paradise spec in 1944. The photograph was taken by Maxwell Frederic Coplan, whose work was highlighted in the book Pink Lemonade.

Circus World Museum

The red and yellow circus train jerked to a halt under a blazing Florida sun on the afternoon of July 18. It had been nearly two weeks since the wagons had last been unloaded at Hartford's Windsor Street yards prior to one of the most dramatic events in circus history.

After an arduous four-day, 1,300-mile trip, the show was now home, arriving in Sarasota amid uncertainty and rumors which swirled about the future of the circus, and whether it would ever tour again.

The first section carrying elephants and other performing animals, along with working men and the cookhouse, arrived about 1:30 that Tuesday afternoon. The second section followed closely behind, consisting of Pullmans and private cars inhabited by exhausted performers and executives. As the first two trains rolled in it resembled any other homecoming, yet when the third and final section arrived there was visible evidence of the holocaust that had occurred 12-days before in Hartford.

That final group of flat cars carried 36 blistered and charred wagons along with the remnants of props that had been exposed to the flames on the afternoon of July 6.¹ As soon as the train was spotted, scores of working men, many of whom were taped and bandaged from burns they had received while battling the fire and helping to rescue victims, went silently about the business of unloading the heavy wagons.²

In the hours immediately following the fire, the future of the circus looked grim. When Herbert Duval, the show's legal adjuster, surveyed the smoldering ruins he blurted, "We're out of business," a comment overheard by a newspaper reporter and flashed from coast-to-coast. When the fire broke out, Roland Butler, the general press agent, was ahead of the show in Springfield, Massachusetts. As soon as he heard the news he rushed back to Hartford where he met with reporters and put a positive spin on the tragedy, predicting that the circus would return to the road later in the summer, perhaps using the previous season's tent, which he told a reporter was "still in pretty good shape."³

At the same time that Butler was making statements about the future of the circus, several of the show's executives and department heads were being questioned by police and fire investigators. Only hours after the fire had been extinguished, five of them were arrested and charged with manslaughter. James A. Haley, the vice president of the circus and the highest-ranking executive on the lot that day, along with general manager George W. Smith were each held on \$15,000 bail. Boss canvasman Leonard Aylesworth; chief electrician Edward Versteeg, and transportation superintendent David W. Blanchfield were also charged and held on \$10,000 bail each, pending a hearing on July 19.

The management of the circus had hoped to get the animals, equipment and personnel back to Sarasota as soon as possible, however the fire investigation, combined with a flurry of lawsuits kept the crippled show in Hartford for eight long days. At 3:00 A.M. on Saturday, July 8, about 36 hours after the first alarm had sounded, a Hartford County sheriff's deputy served the New Haven, New York and Hartford railroad with papers that would keep the circus train immobilized until a judge decided when it could leave the city. The 79 flatcars and coaches were not going anywhere.⁴

This newspaper ad ran on the final day of the stand at State Fair Park located just outside of Milwaukee.

Chris Berry Collection

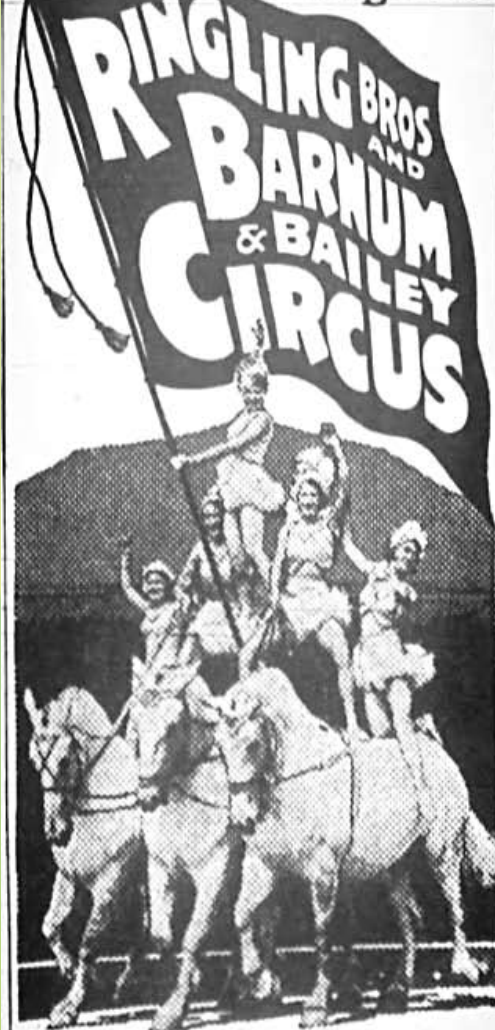
STATE FAIR GROUNDS

Open Air Performances!

Last Times TODAY

2:15 & 8:15--DOORS OPEN 1 & 7

*The GREATEST SHOW
ON EARTH*



Presenting The GREATEST PERFORMANCE in HISTORY
PRODUCED BY

**ROBERT AUBREY Mrs. CHAS.
RINGLING HALEY RINGLING**

STAGED BY
ROBERT RINGLING

Magnificent NEW Super Spectacles, Fabulous
Features and Amazingly Accomplished Acts
and Artists in Amplitudinous Abundance!

TICKETS CIRCUS DAYS AT
SCHWARTZMAN'S NEWS & PIPE
SHOP — 1343 "O" ST.
ALSO FAIR GROUNDS.

With the tour at a standstill, billing also came to a halt. Arthur Hopper, general agent and traffic manager, reported to *The Billboard* that all of those on the advance were gathering in Cleveland and would remain there until they received direction. Meanwhile cloth advertising banners that had been tacked high up on buildings in Ohio and New York state were pulled down and saved, ready to be recycled when the show began moving again.⁵

In the days that followed, dozens of lawsuits were filed against both the circus and the city of Hartford. The mayor of Hartford, William Mortenson, tried to alleviate some of the pain the community was feeling when he went on the radio and asked that any remaining circus posters in store windows and empty buildings be removed, personally paying to have a large billboard pulled down.⁶

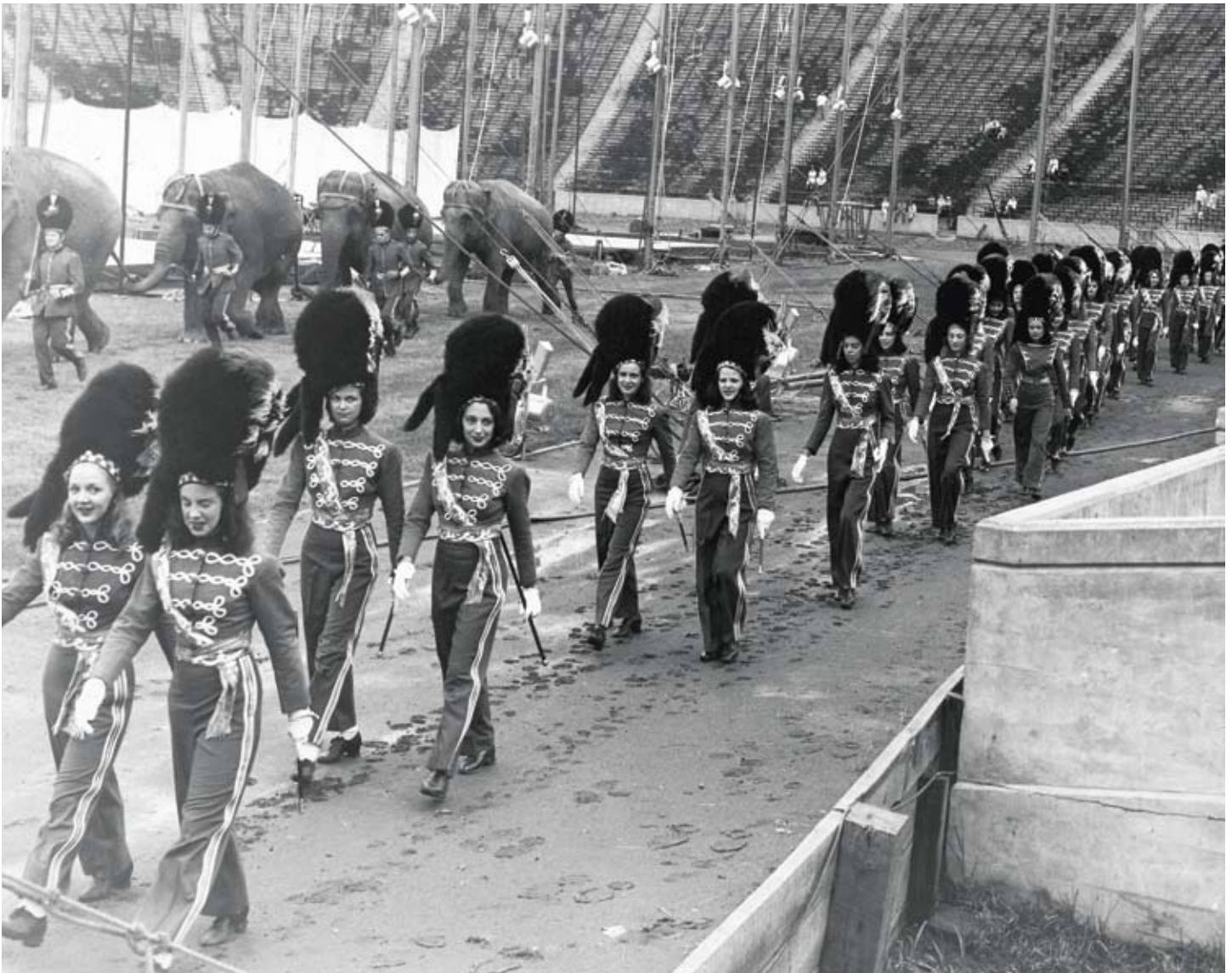
By Monday, July 10, four days after the circus had been scheduled to leave, hundreds of working men, performers and animals remained stranded because of the court order,

and with no ticket sales to offset the expenses, costs were mounting. It was estimated that the circus lost \$80,000 (\$1,150,000 in 2019) during the eight days it sat idle.⁷

The stalled show also created sanitation issues both at the railyards and the showgrounds. When the health department inspected the train and the lot they discovered that despite the best efforts of the circus, garbage and manure was in abundance. The sounds and smells of the menagerie also angered nearby residents who were already rattled by the fact that a tragedy had occurred in their neighborhood.⁸

Although most show personnel remained on the train, a handful of performers and executives checked into the Bond Hotel, and a few were still being cared for in Hartford hospitals. While none of the circus staff was killed in the fire, some 60 employees were injured during the rescue operation, with several requiring hospitalization.⁹

The ushers and concession workers who were working in the tent when the fire started were among those who suf-



The rain that plagued the opening in Akron did not slow down a platoon of showgirls seen marching on the muddy Rubber Bowl track during "The Changing of the Guard" finale.

Circus World Museum

fered the most. Walter Sibley, executive secretary of the National Showman's Association said, "There can be no doubt that these hustlers saved hundreds of lives. One big butcher stood at the cat runway and literally threw children out of the big top for ten minutes." Among those singled out was John M. Carson, the veteran head usher. Carson was believed to be the last person to leave the burning big top after he herded hundreds of panic-stricken patrons to safety.¹⁰

Dick Miller, who was on the front door staff in 1944, described the eight days waiting in Hartford as being a time when the cookhouse was "putting out some swell meals." He added that "the dressing room looked like a laundry with so many people doing their washing and ironing." Miller said "Everything at the lot was just as it was after the fire. All in the dressing room had their trunks packed waiting for the word to go home or to get ready to show."¹¹

As the number of lawsuits began growing, a group of Hartford attorneys realized that damages could easily outstrip the holdings of the show and possibly force it into bankruptcy, something that could leave the survivors with nothing. The lawyers realized, however, that if the circus was placed into temporary receivership it could continue to operate, with the profits of the corporation paying off the claims over time.

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey generated about \$1,000,000 in profit during a typical year in the mid-1940s, and by the end of July, lawsuits totaling more than a million dollars had already been filed.¹²

The plan to continue to operate the show was approved by Superior Court Judge John King and attorney Edward Rogin was appointed as the receiver. In that role Rogin took possession of all of menagerie, wagons and train cars with the understanding that he would preserve the assets until the circus could start generating revenue again and start to pay off the survivor's claims.

Rogin knew that time was of the essence, so he arranged for the circus to deliver \$1,000,000 as security, \$380,000 of the deposit was in cash, along with show's insurance policies. With the collateral in hand, the circus was given permission to return to Sarasota and begin preparing for the rest of the season.¹³

As the train was loading on the morning of July 15, Roland Butler told reporters that the circus would resume its tour as soon as equipment damaged by the fire could be replaced. "We intend to lose no time and will resume activities as soon as possible," he said, adding that while no specific itinerary had been scheduled, the circus would will probably pick up the tour somewhere in the Midwest.

When asked whether the show would again perform under canvas, Butler said that while there was a spare tent in winter quarters, it was not practical to use it since it had not been treated to resist fire, adding, "I don't think there will ever again be a tent that won't be fireproofed."¹⁴

As the train was en route to Florida the circus opened an office in Hartford to deal with business that was related to the fire. Legal adjuster Herbert Duval appeared on a Hartford



Although the menagerie tent was not damaged in the Hartford fire, only the sideshow canvas was fireproofed when the tour resumed. The menagerie and the performance were both presented in the open.

Circus World Museum

radio station and declared that the show was determined to stay in business and “to pay 100-cents to the dollar for every claim of any sort for which we are liable,” adding, “We are certain, we are confident, of our ability to survive. All we ask is the blessing of reasonable time in which to devote the fullest measure of our ability to creating the financial reverses that will be needed to meet this emergency.”¹⁵

Roland Butler also addressed the financial obligation that the circus was assuming when he spoke to reporters during a stop on the trip to Sarasota. “We’ll be paying our profits to Hartford, Connecticut for the next 15 years,” he said, adding that losses would run into millions of dollars. “More than 100 suits already have been filed, and that is only the beginning. They’ll be suing for months to come.”

Upon arriving in Sarasota, circus management declined to answer reporters’ questions, assigning that task to F. Beverly Kelley, director of the show’s radio publicity department. Speaking on behalf of Robert Ringling and general manager George Smith, Kelley said that the entire organization was devoted to getting the show back on the road.

“The tentative plan of the circus is that we will never go out under a main tent of canvas until a suitable fire-proofing process has been discovered and the cost is within the reach of the circus. As to the future, the plan now, according to Robert Ringling, is to reconstruct the same arena that we will use when the tour is started again. Here in quarters we will make an arena exactly like the one we are to use. We will all be able to tell better when that is finished. As it is, we are just groping around in something that is brand new to all of us. It is probably the plan of the circus to have all steel seats in the future. That can’t possibly come about this year; there isn’t time, nor do we have the equipment.”¹⁶

Karl Wallenda also went before the assembled press corps, speaking from the perspective of a performer. “We don’t know what is going to happen in the next two or three weeks, but we do know that the show must go on, and it will go on. We performers are all under contract and our pay goes on whether we work or not, but we all want to go out again and I know we will.”¹⁷

Although a process for fireproofing canvas existed, on the day of the tragedy Robert Ringling had told reporters from his home in Evanston, Illinois that while the circus had applied for the chemicals, army tents had been given priority and the government had denied the request.¹⁸

In the days following the fire, other circuses such as Cole Bros. and Dailey Bros. continued to draw big crowds under canvas,¹⁹ yet newspaper stories and editorials began appearing that advocated more stringent rules and regulations for tent shows.

One of the first states to react was Maine where the de-

partment of insurance required substantial documentation that tents used for a public exhibition had to be fireproofed within six-months prior to the performance. The rules also regulated the size and number of exits and mandated an adequate number of fire extinguishers. In Indiana the state fire marshal instructed fire chiefs to prohibit smoking in tents where crowds assembled and said that the number of tickets sold could not exceed the number of seats. In Detroit and Portland, Oregon, ordinances were drafted that called for the fireproofing of all tents used for public gatherings, and in Trenton, New Jersey officials said they would exercise “every possible precaution.”²⁰

During those dark days the circus received many letters of encouragement including a poignant note from 12-year old Philip Corkron of Richmond, Virginia. The letter read in part:



Ernestine Clark was a star performer in 1944, appearing on the program cover and presenting both a solo riding act and a trapeze act. This photograph was taken September 9 at State Fair Park in West Allis, Wisconsin, just prior to her 23rd birthday. Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

"I am sorry that you had the misfortune which overtook you on July 6. I am also sorry for the people who were victims.

"I remember your last visit to Richmond. I was about nine then. The chance to see a circus is something that every boy should have. It is a part of the America which our Army, Navy and Marines are fighting for.

"I am buying all of the War Stamps and Bonds that I can, but I can't believe that Uncle Sam would object if all the children would give to a fund to help bring back the circus so that all the boys will have the same chance that I did.

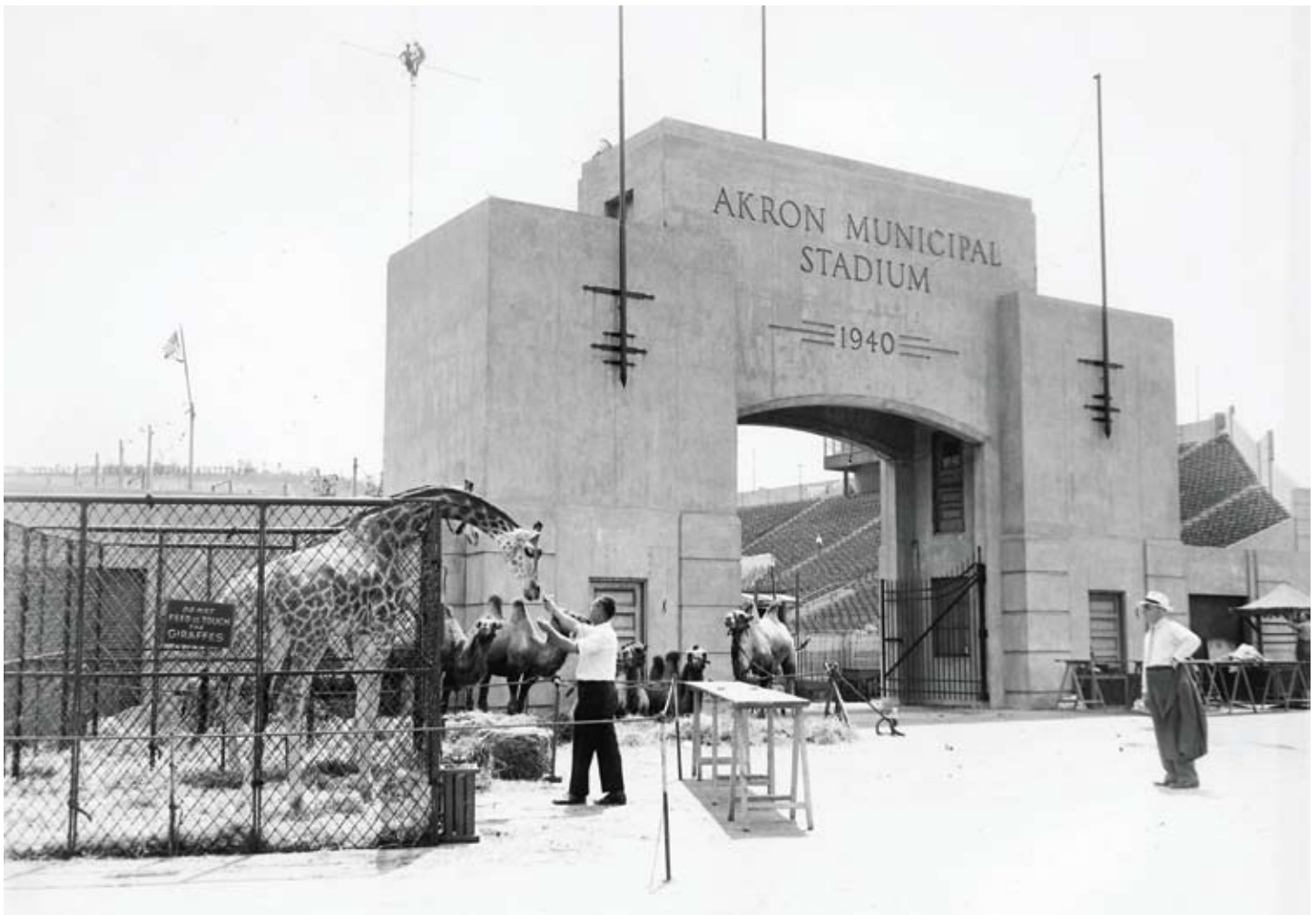
"I am sending you 25 cents and hope that all children in America will do the same and that you will come this way again some time."²¹

James Haley replied to the boy, thanking him and assuring him that if they needed financial help he would be the first to be contacted. The boy's War Stamp money was returned to him.

Another letter came from a San Antonio circus fan and read, in part: "I have granddaughters, six and three years old. The oldest and I are old customers of yours. The other is anticipating her first trip. We are grieved about your catastrophe. Attached hereto you will find a cashier's check for \$3.00 for which delivery to use on your next trip here \$3.00 worth of credit on tickets we will need to see the circus."

Press Agent Bev Kelley replied to this one: "Your letter encourages us a great deal and we appreciate your confidence in us. We mean to go out again this year. I am returning your check, as it is unlikely we shall come as far west as San Antonio this year. We'll try to keep the banners flying and the band playing long past the time when your granddaughters bring their grandchildren to see *The Greatest Show on Earth*."²²

In addition to the loss of the big top, the seats, poles and much of the other equipment was either damaged or destroyed, and many performers lost all their props. Without a fireproofed tent and no chance of getting enough chemicals to treat the spare big top, the decision was made to rehabilitate the wounded show and return to the road on a route that would include stadiums, ballparks and fairgrounds,



Some of the menagerie animals were located outside the main entrance to the Rubber Bowl in Akron, Ohio.

Circus World Museum

where permanent seats were in place.

With the plan firmed up, the winter quarters became a beehive of activity as showgirls and star performers joined roustabouts and managers to repair the damage created by the fire. As some of them wove nets and prepared rigging, others were hammering out iron bars twisted by the heat of the fire. Still others were scraping and painting blackened props and wagons. In his notes about the 1944 season, Dick Miller said that because everyone was working in the open, "sunburns are quite the fad." He also wrote that after a hard day of work many would head across the John Ringling Causeway for beach parties that were held three or four times a week.²³

A reporter from the *Miami Herald* who visited Sarasota to check on the progress wrote that everyone involved believed, "It's going to be a bigger show and a better one than ever."²⁴

While in quarters the circus was able to obtain 1,200 gallons of flameproofing chemicals, and although that was not enough to treat the big top, it was applied to the side-walls of the dressing and horse tents, along with an entirely new sideshow top, the only tent that would be open to the public.

Once the canvas was treated, tests were conducted by Lawrence Heffner, the chief chemist for Baltimore's William E. Hooper Company. For nearly a minute, a flaming blowtorch was applied to a section of the treated sideshow tent. As the first flame touched the canvas it began to glow bright red. The glow continued for as long as the blowtorch was applied, but when it removed, the flame and glow died out, leaving only a blackened burned hole in the fabric. The newsmen and executives who were on hand for the test agreed that if the tents and sidewall could withstand similar or lesser tests, all new circus canvas would be flameproof.²⁵

Booking the big show into stadiums and fairgrounds required a finesse unlike that needed to lease a grassy pasture on the outskirts of a community, as permanent structures also had permanent tenants. The opening date was originally set at the University of Cincinnati's Nippert Field on August 2, however school administrators changed their mind, concerned that the stadium turf could be damaged only weeks before the start of the football season. A similar situation occurred at the University of Dayton where the circus had hoped to play August 4-5.²⁶

One of the cities that had been on the original 1944 itinerary was Akron, Ohio, scheduled for a three-day stand under canvas beginning July 24. While the dates were cancelled immediately after the fire,²⁷ as the new tour began shaping up, Akron was back on the route, confirmed for the opening date that would run from August 4 through the 6 at the Rubber Bowl Stadium. Once the date was locked in, Murray Powers, one of the editors of the *Akron Beacon Journal* dubbed the outdoor tour "The Blue Heaven Circuit."²⁸

Decades later Powers recalled that the Akron date was

prompted by a telegram sent by Charles Burns, manager of the Rubber Bowl, to Robert Ringling shortly after the fire. In the telegram Burns expressed his condolences to the circus president, along with his hope that the circus would be able to continue touring. A few weeks later Ringling called the stadium manager and asked if there were any dates available at the Rubber Bowl. After a brief negotiation the circus agreed to pay \$1,500 a day for the three-day stand.²⁹

The plan was for the rehabilitated show to leave Sarasota on the morning of Friday, July 30 and arrive on the morning of August 2, only 26 days after the fire, and two days before the midseason opening.

The distance to Akron was the same as from Hartford to Sarasota, 1,300 miles. This time, however, the trip was made with the eager anticipation of getting back on the road rather than the uncertainty that had followed the trains to Florida.

The circus left Sarasota in two sections,³⁰ with 12 flatcars that had been used to carry the canvas, pole and seat wagons left behind at winter quarters. The working men from those departments were now assigned to other duties on the show, alleviating some of the man-power shortages faced by circuses during World War II.³¹

The three rings and two stages would be configured as they had been prior to the fire, the big difference being that the entire performance would be presented facing one direction rather than the traditional under canvas set-up which was designed to accommodate spectators on both sides of the big top. The performance would also be staged as close as possible to one side of the stadium or ballpark to provide proximity to permanent bleachers and seats.

The rigging depended on 24 quarter poles, (12 in the front and 12 in the back) each 42 feet high. The poles supported the rigging for the aerial acts, cloud swing and lighting. Pat Valdo, program director for the circus, described the arrangement as being the same as Madison Square Garden, with the only alterations being made to conform with physical equipment changes.³²

After stops in Atlanta and Cincinnati to feed and water the elephants and other animals, the 68 railroad cars arrived on August 2. The train had barely arrived at South Akron's Pennsylvania Railroad yard when it was discovered that the wagons could not be unloaded because the flatcars were turned backwards, the poles of the wagons facing the wrong direction. A portion of the train had to be taken 15 miles to the town of Hudson where the cars were uncoupled, hitched to another locomotive and brought back to the rail-yard. The set-up was further delayed as the wagons, animals and equipment had to be hauled five miles from the runs to the Rubber Bowl.³³

The setup in Akron was a template for the remainder of the stadium season. Most of the physical equipment was spotted outside of the stadium. The cookhouse, horse tent and other smaller tops were located across a highway on a lot adjoining the Municipal Airport, and the elephants were



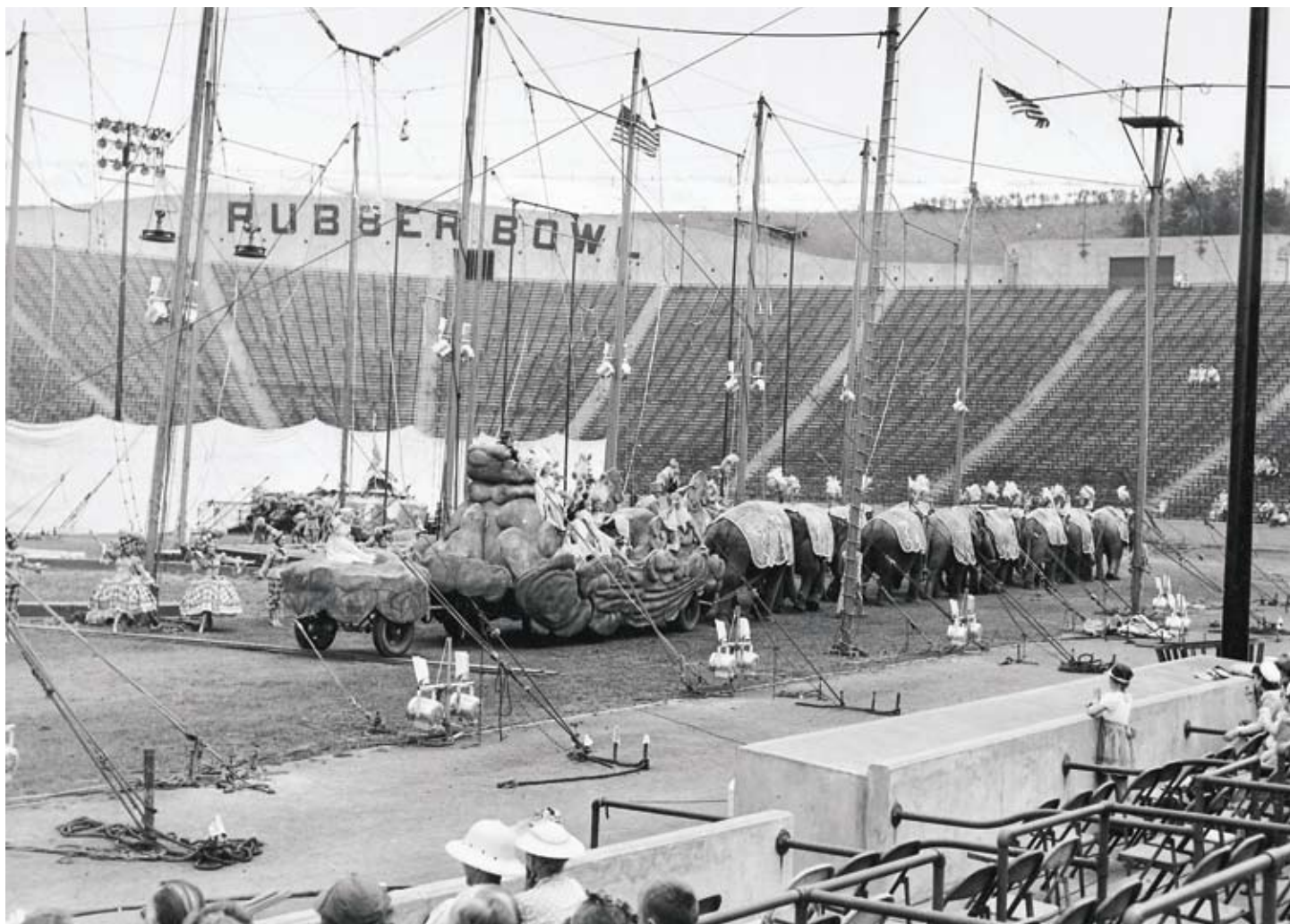
Only 26-days after fire destroyed the big top in Hartford, the rehabilitated circus arrived in Akron and began the set up for appearances in the open air.

Circus World Museum



Extensive portions of the seating in the Rubber Bowl were empty at this Akron performance.

Circus World Museum



Emmett Kelly, star of Panto's Paradise, was perched atop the "pay-off" float as the spec concluded in Akron.

Circus World Museum

tethered alongside the Soapbox Derby track adjacent to the stadium. Up a slope from the highway was the midway, with novelty stands and ticket wagons along one side and the new flameproofed sideshow in a push pole tent, on the other. At the end of the midway was the marquee, leading into the menagerie which was created by sidewall around the cage wagons. The spec wagons and paraphernalia for Panto's Paradise were grouped outside adjacent to the menagerie.³⁴ The dressing rooms for the performers were underneath the stadium, and in his notes describing the scene in Akron, Dick Miller wrote that everyone on the show "took advantage of the many showers in the stadium dressing rooms, bucket baths being forgotten."³⁵

The fact that the circus was being presented under the open sky gave the press department the opportunity to promote the fact that high acts such as the Wallendas and Torrence and Victoria, "The Comet Couple" would be presented at dizzying heights never seen. While the Wallenda high-wire act was regularly performed 30 feet from the ground, it would now be presented 60 feet in the air. Earlier in the season the iron jaw aerial act of Torrence and Victoria had

been presented 50 feet up, near the ceiling of the big top. In Akron and elsewhere that summer it was performed 135 feet from the ground.

After a full day of setup, followed by rehearsals that lasted until midnight on August 3, the circus was back, ready to resume its tour, less than a month after tragedy struck in Hartford.

Among visitors at opening were Charles Slusser, mayor of Akron, who welcomed the show in an address in which he praised the efforts of the Ringling officials to keep the show moving and wished them success. Eighty-two-year old Walter L. Main was also there, along with former circus owner Charles Sparks and Tom Gregory, president of the Circus Fans of America. The events of the day were captured by a large contingent of national and local newspaper and magazine reporters and photographers.³⁶

About 2,000 sweltering spectators braved 95-degree heat for that first outdoor performance, gathered in one small section of the 37,000-seat stadium. Despite the meager crowd, George Smith, the circus general manager said, "The show is as full as under the tent. Neither the perform-

ers nor the animals are affected by the lack of canvas above them.” Robert Ringling echoed the sentiment, adding “I’m confident the absence of the big top will not detract from the show.”³⁷

Despite several challenges, including a polio epidemic the week of the performances, the first stand in Akron was a relative success. Getting to the stadium was a bit problematic as personal automobile use was restricted by gasoline rationing and the Rubber Bowl was located seven miles from downtown Akron with only intermittent bus service. That distance, along with the polio scare, and rain or threatening weather each of the three days the circus showed, no doubt curtailed ticket sales.

More than 5,000 people attended the first night performance and despite two downpours the show was well received. While the general admission seats were covered by a canopy, those who had paid extra for reserved seats were soaked. Robert Ringling must have anticipated the inevitable question about refunds, telling a reporter for the *Akron Beacon Journal*, “We’ll do the same as the baseball clubs. If we’re rained out before the show is half over, we’ll give a rain check.”³⁸ The performance was completed as scheduled and no refunds or rainchecks were issued. The second night drew over 6,000, and the final evening performance drew about 9,000.

The performance in Akron was essentially the same as what had been presented under canvas. The show opened with the Alfred Court animal acts in the two end rings, followed by the Wallendas. Other acts included the equestrian performances of the Ostermaiers, Los Asveras Troupe, and the Bradnas, along with Roland Tiebor’s sea lions and the Clarkonians flying act.

The aerial ballet featured 14 simultaneous cloud swings, with rigging attached to the quarter poles, and the elephant act was once again “The Changing of the Guard,” the same basic routine that had been seen in 1943.³⁹

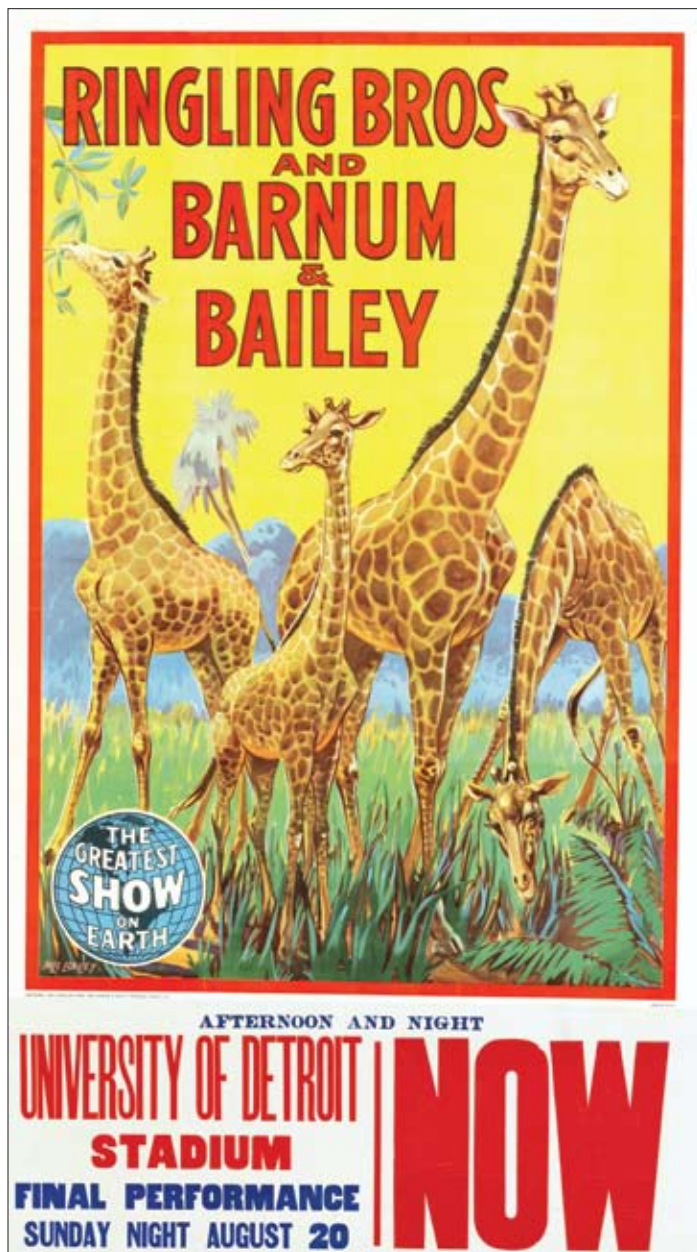
The Panto’s Paradise spec starred Emmett Kelly who “fell asleep” in the ring, “dreaming” of a magical world as a procession of floats, animals and performers passed by, only to awaken in time to ride out on the last float. The production was very well received as it has been earlier in the season, and on that opening day in Akron, the tramp clown who had made a career by performing in silence, didn’t hesitate to speak out on the future of the circus, “We must forget the fire. We must entertain,” he said. “In wartime it is more important than ever. It is going to be great in the open air.”⁴⁰

Fred Bradna, who had been with the circus for over 40 years agreed, “To stage the show in the stadium was entirely new to me,” adding that the setup was, “Impressive in the daytime and magnificent under artificial light.” The 72-year old ringmaster predicted success for the remainder of the season.⁴¹

That success would be incumbent on the work by those in advance of the circus, and as the show was being pre-

sented in Akron, billposters were finishing up their work in Detroit, the next stop on the “blue heaven” tour.

According to *The Billboard*, for the first time ever the show did not use 24-sheet lithographs in Detroit because the local billboard companies were “sold out” and did not



After the show opened at the Detroit Stadium on August 8, billposters made one final pass through the city, reinforcing that the circus had arrived by pasting the word “NOW” to the show’s lithographs.

Chris Berry Collection

have the capacity to handle the huge posters. With limited opportunities for big billboard showings, the Detroit newspaper campaign was heavier than usual, supplemented by a significant number of radio commercials.⁴²

On the same day the Akron performances were wrapping up, Advertising Car Number 1, managed by Frank Mahery, left Detroit for Chicago and the big stand at Soldier

Field. According to *The Billboard*, the Chicago Loop was soon ablaze with cloth banners tacked high on the sides of tall buildings. As in Detroit no 24-sheets were used on Chicago's commercial billboards, but thousands of window lithographs and bus cards were supplemented by posters that were pasted to walls and distributed throughout the suburbs.⁴³

At the same time billposters were fanning out across Chicago's neighborhoods, the circus was facing opposition in Detroit. Residents who lived near the University of Detroit Stadium vigorously protested the decision to grant the show a permit, and while they did not stop the circus from coming, the city council did ban all parking within a half-mile of the stadium. It also passed two other restrictive ordinances, one which required circuses to post bond of \$100,000 or similar insurance for fire and other liability, and another that directed the fire department, the department of building and safety, and the health board to each assign personnel to police the grounds at the expense of the circus.⁴⁴

Unlike the brief three-day stand in Akron, the circus was booked into the University of Detroit Stadium for 13 days, opening on August 8 to an invitation-only audience of about 8,000. The tickets to that performance were tied to War Bond sales and most of those who saw that show that opening night were soldiers, sailors and marines in uniform. The next day about 9,000 were on hand for the first public

performance.

The layout at the University of Detroit was similar to Akron, with only one side of the football stadium being used. General admission for the performance was \$1.40 for adults and 85 cents for children, with reserved seats priced at \$2.60. As in Akron, attendance, especially by children was affected by a warning by the City Health Commissioner of a possible polio epidemic.⁴⁵

While in Detroit the circus was thrown another curve when officials at Miami's 22,000-seat Orange Bowl rescinded their invitation for the show to play a week there in early November. Orange Bowl management had decided that because of the heavy football schedule the stadium could not accommodate the circus until after the first of the year, long after the show had planned to close.⁴⁶

Although the circus was once again generating revenue at the ticket wagon, the people of Hartford continued to deal with the scars left by the fire. As the show was closing in Detroit, Herbert Duval, the legal adjuster in charge of the newly opened Hartford office, officially expressed appreciation for the help that had been provided in the weeks following the disaster. In a letter that appeared in local newspapers, Duval wrote: "I want to express the deep and sincere appreciation of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus to the city of Hartford for its magnificent assistance at the time of the July 6 fire and for its patient, kind and generous coopera-



Soldier Field, the home of the Chicago Bears, became the home of the Ringling elephants for two weeks in August of 1944.

Circus World Museum

tion. We are indeed most grateful.”⁴⁷

From Detroit the trains traveled to Chicago where the show was set up inside Soldier Field on the shores of Lake Michigan. The home of the Chicago Bears was one of the largest stadiums in the world, and in 1944 it accommodated 74,000 football fans, with 15,000 seats on the northeast corner of the field set aside for the circus performance.⁴⁸

As in Detroit, opening night at Soldier Field was turned over to the payroll savings division of the Treasury Department. Ten thousand tickets were distributed to defense workers who were enrolled in payroll savings plans at factories that were producing products tied to the war effort. The entire audience on the evening of August 22 was made up of workers who were donating a portion of their paycheck to the purchase of War Bonds.⁴⁹

While the show was in Chicago, the *Hartford Courant* sent reporter T. F. Wagner to Soldier Field to report back on how the circus was recovering from the fire. In addition to his observations about such things as the fireproof sideshow tent and the fact that firemen were stationed throughout the lot, he spoke with several performers about the fire, including equestrian director Fred Bradna who said, “None of us

is really over the tragedy in Hartford, but in the tradition of the entertainment world the show must go on, just as it did before.”

When the Hartford reporter spoke with Helen Wallenda, she talked about the change she was experiencing from performing under the open sky. “When a strong wind pushes the poles we use to balance, our act gets out of control at once,” she said during a rehearsal. “We are much higher now too, and there is an altogether different feeling about looking up at the sky than at the brown canvas tent roof. Now I just look at my toes because I find myself day-dreaming if I start to watch the sky.”⁵⁰

After two weeks in Chicago, the show made an overnight run to Indianapolis for a two-day stand at Victory Field, a minor league baseball stadium. After unloading at the Big Four railyard on Tibbs Avenue, the circus gave three performances in Indianapolis. Local newspapers reported that it was the first time that a show that large had performed outdoors since Buffalo Bill’s Wild West more than 30 years before. The opening matinee and evening performance on September 5 went off without a hitch, but the skies opened during the matinee the next day. While the audience of 8,000



This photograph was taken during the set-up at State Fair Park in West Allis, Wisconsin on September 8. The scene shows not only the outdoor rings and stages, but also the rigging for the high-wire and trapeze acts.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

kept dry under the grandstand canopy, the performers and animals were soaked. Once again, the circus accommodated those who purchased War Bonds, with 300 seats made available for each of the three performances. The campaign in Indianapolis generated \$62,231.75 in the sale of bonds.⁵¹

From Indianapolis the circus traveled to Milwaukee where the polio outbreak again kept many from attending the performance at the State Fair Grounds in suburban West Allis. Only about 600 people were on hand for the opening matinee, with 1,100 at the evening performance. While the turnout was slightly better over the next two days, cool weather conditions also kept attendance at about 50-percent less than Milwaukee had delivered in 1943.⁵² The circus had originally planned to move to Madison from Milwaukee, however local officials refused the request, again because of concern that the show equipment would ruin the turf at Breese Stevens Field.⁵³

With Madison off the route, the circus traveled to Davenport, Iowa for the first one-day stand since the show had resumed its tour, and the date nearly became a total loss. After unloading the train and setting up at Davenport Municipal Stadium a thunderstorm forced the matinee to be cancelled. Despite a drizzle that continued into the evening,

the night show was given in front of an audience of 6,000. According to a review of the performance, the muddy condition on the field proved to be a hazard, and while no one was injured, the less than ideal conditions created numerous problems during the performance.⁵⁴

Rain continued to follow the show from Davenport into Des Moines, yet it did not keep some 20,000 people from attending the performances at the Iowa State Fairgrounds September 12 and 13. Despite a half-hour rain delay prior to the September 12 matinee, a crowd of about 4,000 attended the show, followed by another 5,000 for the evening performance. Another 11,000 saw the two shows that were presented the next day.

The setup in Des Moines placed the performance directly in front of the fair's amphitheater. The work tents were pitched on the infield of the race track, and the sideshow was on the regular fairground midway. Tractors could not be used on the race track, so elephants had to be used to shuttle wagons and other equipment on the lot which provided somewhat of a challenge.⁵⁵

After seven weeks of poor turnouts and bad weather, the tide seemed to turn with a performance at Kansas City's Ruppert Stadium on September 23. On that evening the show



The circus audience in the Milwaukee suburb of West Allis was seated in the State Fair grandstand, seen on the right. The newly fireproofed sideshow tent was located across the midway.

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delivered one of the largest audiences in the history of the Ringling circus. According to *The Billboard* 16,604 people were on hand for a sellout performance in the minor league baseball park that seated just over 17,000 people. If true, that is just short of the record crowd of 16,702 that crammed into the tent in nearby Concordia on September 13, 1924.⁵⁶

Big crowds continued to follow the show, including in Topeka, only the second one-day stand of the outdoor season. According to Robert Ringling it was the biggest day ever in Topeka where record crowds were reported.⁵⁷

The money continued to flow as the show turned south into Texas where 60,000 attended four performances over two days at Fort Worth's LaGrave Field, a minor league baseball park only a mile from downtown. With a seating capacity of 12,000, at least 3,000 reportedly stood at each performance. Many soldiers stationed in and near Fort Worth, along with thousands of defense workers, attended the shows, and during the evening performance the baseball field's brilliant floodlights added to the presentation by supplementing those provided by the circus.⁵⁸

About 37,000 people saw the show in Dallas, as neither rain nor heat, nor an unjustified complaint to the Better Business Bureau, dampened the enthusiasm of the crowds that packed Rebel Field twice a day for three days from September 25-27. The opening performances were held on a hot clear Monday, and capacity crowds were on hand on Tuesday and Wednesday.

On Tuesday, newspapers carried a story that the Dallas Better Business Bureau had reported several complaints from customers who claimed that they had purchased reserved seats, only to learn the seats did not exist. Circus officials said the mix-up occurred because Rebel Field was confusing to crowds and because of the manpower shortage there were not enough ushers. Despite what could have been a damaging news report and a soaking downpour during the Tuesday night performance, 7,500 attended the show and less than two dozen asked for rain checks.⁵⁹

From Dallas the show moved to Houston, where once again record crowds were tallied, as they were in Beaumont, only the third one-day stand of the "blue heaven" season. In Beaumont the 6,000-seat baseball park was sold out for both performances with huge crowds being turned away.⁶⁰

Even though the Hartford tragedy will forever define the 1944 season, the tour ended on a positive note in New Orleans. During the four days the show was at Pelican Stadium some 61,000 people bought tickets for the eight performances that were in a ballpark that seated 10,000. While the location was ideal, with plenty of parking and easy loading for the show, the last stand of the season was all the more remarkable because it included two complete washouts and a performance in a sea of mud.⁶¹

With the final performance of 1944 complete, the circus left New Orleans for Sarasota, and after a brief watering stop in Chattahoochee, Florida the two sections of the train ar-

rived at winter quarters on the morning of October 14.

After the trains were unloaded, general manager George Smith said that performers and working staff would be given a three-week vacation before they started rehabilitating the show for the next season. The big news was that the circus would have flameproofed tents for 1945, as the necessary chemicals had been released to the circus from the War Department. By December 16, some 75,000 yards of canvas had been treated and all 40 tents were proclaimed flameproof.⁶²

It took a change in circus leadership before Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey returned to Connecticut in 1948. John Ringling North routed the circus into Bridgeport, Waterbury, New London and on June 18 the small town of Plainville, about 15-miles from the Barbour Street lot where the big top burned almost exactly four years before.

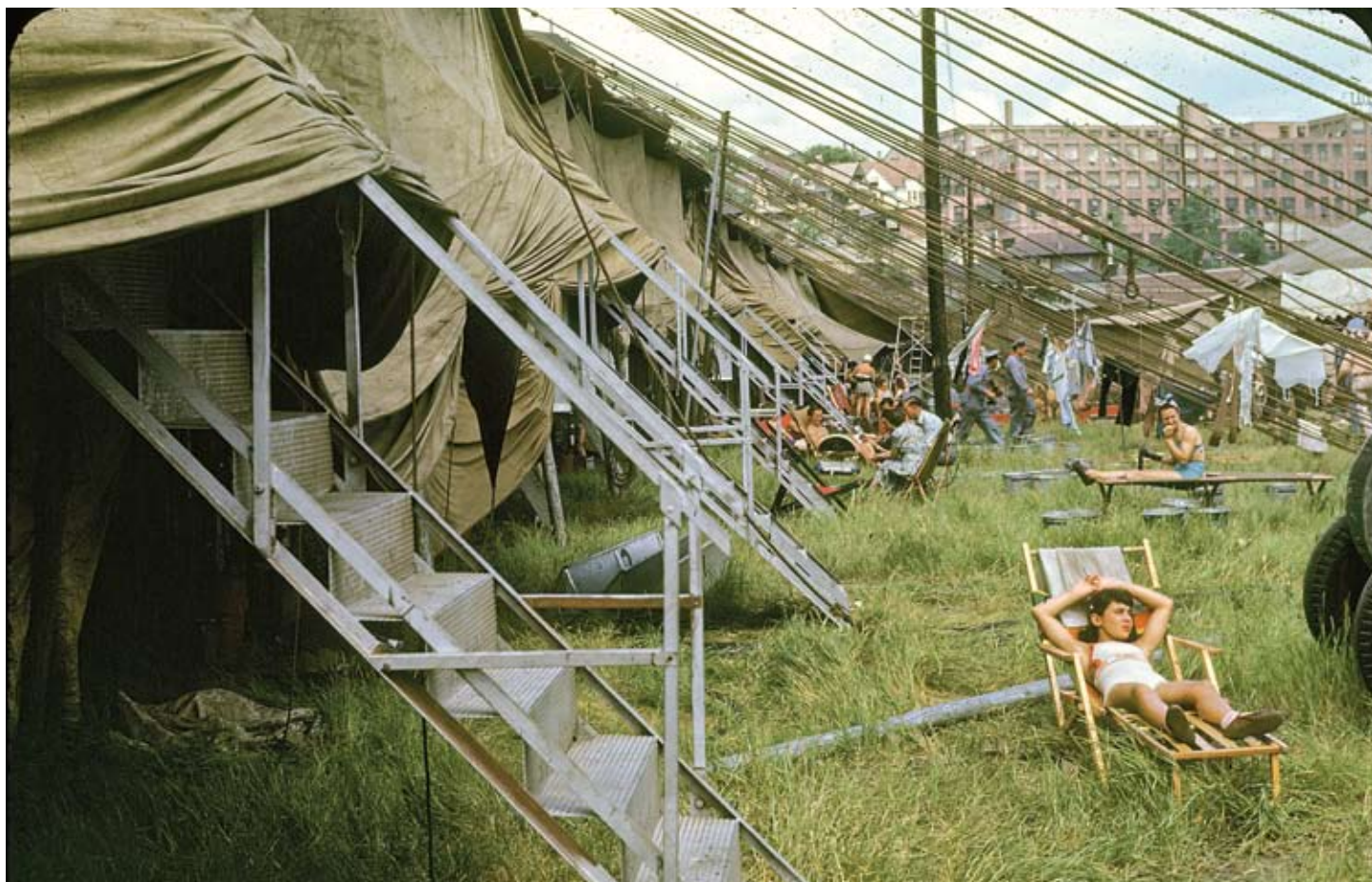
Those who attended the show that day included adults and children who had escaped from the burning tent. Among them, Patricia Murphy who, as a four-year old, lost both of her parents and had been severely burned herself. Now eight years old, she had asked to go to the circus with her aunt and uncle, and while she reportedly enjoyed the performance, she made no mention of the fire during the show.⁶³

Others at the performance noticed that animal acts were now presented in collapsible chain mesh cages and the steel runway from the circus ring to the backyard had been abandoned. Tigers, bears and leopards were now herded into individual cages that were taken from the ring at the end of each act.

Spectators also remarked on the fact that the new metal seat wagons, designed by Arthur Concello, were an improvement over the wooden bleachers that had burned in Hartford. The number of exits at ground level were also evident, along with the fact that each section of seats now had its own exit from the top of the aisle, down a steel stairway that reached outside of the tent.⁶⁴

Ten years after the Hartford disaster the circus made good on its pledge to pay off all the claims associated with the fire. On October 30, 1954, attorney Edward Rogin, who ten-years before had been named receiver of the show, issued his final report and announced the 676 claims against the circus had been "paid in full." Rogin reported that \$3,946,155.70 had been distributed to those who had claimed damages. In his report Rogin praised the circus for living up to its obligations, acknowledging the support of the late Mrs. Charles Ringling and Robert Ringling, along with James Haley and Aubrey Ringling Haley. He also expressed his gratitude to the circus attorney Herbert Duval and former general manager George Smith for "their sound advice and diligent efforts" to settle the claims.⁶⁵

On May 6, 1975, the Ringling circus returned to Hartford for the first time in 31 years as the Blue Unit train pulled into the same Windsor Street freight yard where the show had been stalled for eight days in July of 1944. The circus was back in Hartford with a multi-year contract to exhibit



The new seat wagons designed by Art Concello included fire escapes from the top of the grandstand. This photograph was taken on June 15, 1949 in Waterbury, Connecticut, almost exactly five years after fire had destroyed the big top in nearby Hartford.

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at the new Civic Center, personally negotiated by Kenneth Feld, then a vice president of the circus.

In the three decades since fire had destroyed the big top, the circus had evolved. Air conditioned arenas had replaced canvas tents, a second unit had begun touring, ringmaster Fred Bradna was succeeded by Harold Ronk, William Pryun replaced Merle Evans and the laughs that Emmett Kelly had once evoked were now the responsibility of tramp clown Mark Anthony.

The show had gone on.

The Hartford Civic Center was now a regular stop as the circus returned to the city every year including the final tour when the Red Unit played the arena, now known as the XL Center from April 27-30, 2017.

For a number of those with the circus in 2017, that last four-day stand presented the final opportunity to walk the short distance from the train to the old Barbour Street lot and reflect on the tragedy that had unfolded on that small plot of land so many years before. Former ringmaster Kristen Michelle Wilson recalled the final trip to the old showgrounds. "There were five of us," she said. "After we got there we split up. It was a heavy emotional day as we thought about the spirits of those who were there. There were a lot of

tears shed that day."

She also recalled an encounter after an evening performance when an elderly man made his way to the arena floor with his daughter and grandchild. "He smiled and told me how happy he was to be there as it was only the second time he had ever gone to the circus." As she continued talking to him his face began to darken and he told her that "the only other time was in 1944 when he was ten years old. Now he was going with his daughter and grandchild. As he told his story tears began streaming down his face."⁶⁶

In the summer of 1944 the future of the circus was very much in doubt, yet in a letter to a circus fan, press agent Bev Kelley promised that despite the many challenges on the horizon, the circus would attempt to "keep the banners flying and the band playing" for another five generations.

Only three weeks after the trains left Hartford's Windsor Street railyards for the last time the circus closed forever. Despite claims and lawsuits, new owners and a changing audience, the show had survived for 73 more years and the grandchildren-of-grandchildren *had* been given the privilege experiencing *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

The promise had been kept. The show had gone on. **Bw**

Acknowledgments

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Was it arson?

Many people with the circus thought the Hartford fire was likely the act of an arsonist. Some who have written about the fire say with certainty that it was indeed arson. Others conclude there was no surviving evidence that proved the matter one way or another.

The fire's point of origin was determined to be either on the back canvas wall of the men's restroom or near the base of the big top sidewall adjacent to the men's toilet enclosure. With post-fire testing that appeared to rule out a discarded cigarette as the cause, the point of origin would seem to be particularly suspicious in nature. Where else around the perimeter of the big top would an incendiary find similar concealment?

ment with the show in 1944. Art Concello responded to one inquiry with this telegram dated July 1, 1950.

Concello did not reveal any other times of employment of Segee. However, the back of Segee's employment record – now at Circus World Museum – verifies that he had been again hired by Ringling-Barnum on July 18, 1947 in Marion, Ohio. He was terminated one week later after the show had played Columbus, Dayton, Lima and Toledo.

Segee fully recanted his 1950 confession and insisted until the end of his life that he was not responsible for lighting the fire.

Of course, there were other disgruntled circus employees who could have set the big top fire. Harry Lakin, who

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DAY LETTER	NIGHT LETTER			CODE	NIGHT LETTER
W. P. MARSHALL, PRESIDENT					
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Send the following message, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to

Montreal, Que.
July 1, 1950

Telegraph Desk Herald Tribune
New York City, N. Y.
Regarding Wire.
Robert Segee Signed On In Portland in 1944 And Apparently
Left Show When Paid Off In Maybrook.

Arthur M. Concello, Gen. Manager
Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey
Combined Shows.

Following his arrest in East St. Louis, Robert Dale Segee was extradited to Columbus, Ohio where on May 18, 1950 he confessed to several murders and to having set many fires in Ohio, New Hampshire and Maine. During questioning, Segee stated he had been with the circus in Hartford in 1944. He noted that he may have started the big top fire, but perhaps only dreamed of carrying out the evil act.

After the story of Segee's "confession" hit the newspapers in June, Ringling-Barnum was contacted about his employ-

ment with the show in 1944. Art Concello responded to one inquiry with this telegram dated July 1, 1950. Concello did not reveal any other times of employment of Segee. However, the back of Segee's employment record – now at Circus World Museum – verifies that he had been again hired by Ringling-Barnum on July 18, 1947 in Marion, Ohio. He was terminated one week later after the show had played Columbus, Dayton, Lima and Toledo. Segee fully recanted his 1950 confession and insisted until the end of his life that he was not responsible for lighting the fire. Of course, there were other disgruntled circus employees who could have set the big top fire. Harry Lakin, who

GTP

CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY CONVENTION

Sarasota – May 1-4, 2019

by Chris Berry

For many years American circuses traditionally opened their tented season on or around the “First of May,” so it was appropriate that the Circus Historical Society would kick off its annual convention on that date in the historic city of Sarasota.



Legendary triple-somersaulting flyer and Monte-Carlo Gold Clown award winner, Tito Gaona spoke and answered questions on Thursday morning.

Julie Parkinson photo

Prior to the official opening of the convention, a group of early arrivals were treated to a tour of the International Independent Showman's Museum in nearby Riverview, and a visit to the Showpeople's Winterquarters, a mobile home park for retired showpeople. The three-acre site provides an affordable and permanent home for retired showpeople with the centerpiece being a former Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey railroad car, donated by Feld Entertainment and now being renovated for use as a community center.

The official opening reception was held Wednesday night at the Showfolks Club in Sarasota, where The Ringling's Executive Director, Steven High, welcomed all to Sarasota and spoke about the future capital plans for the Ringling Museum. Former clown Kenny Dodd presented films of the 1956 season of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, followed by the recollections of former showman and CHS member Bill Taggart, who spoke of his time with *The Greatest Show on Earth* in the 1950s.

Thursday morning featured a keynote address provided by legendary trapeze artist Tito Gaona who reminisced about his early days as a flyer, along with some of the highlights of his career. Gaona was followed by performer and circus executive Jeanette Williams who spoke with Chris Berry about the lease 50 years ago of Circus Williams acts and animals by her mother Carola Williams to Irvin Feld. It was that arrangement which allowed Ringling Bros. and



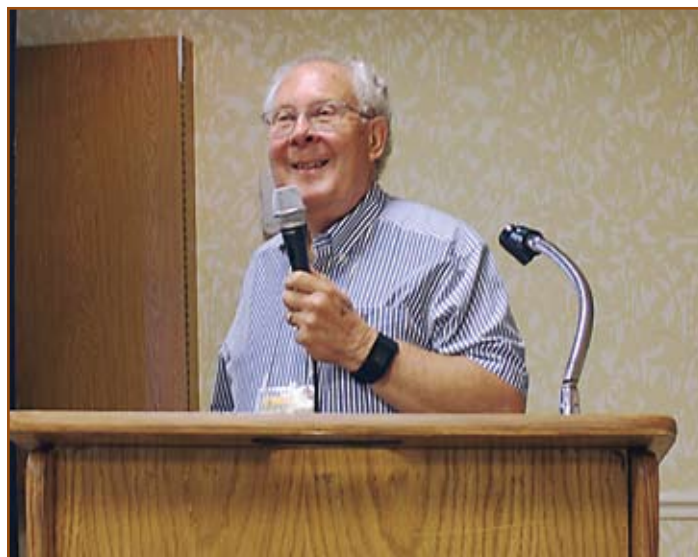
Nearly 100 members of the Circus Historical Society gathered in Sarasota for the 2019 convention.

Julie Parkinson photo



Left to right: CHS Board member Chris Berry, Jeanette Williams representing the 8th generation of Germany's Circus Williams family, and former CHS President Deborah Walk.

Julie Parkinson photo



Dale Williams provided anecdotes about the venerable David "Deacon" Blanchfield and his career as a circus superintendent.

Julie Parkinson photo

Barnum & Bailey to tour two circuses during the landmark 1969 season and for Gunther Gebel-Williams to come to America.

The Thursday schedule also included presentations by former Ringling performer and executive Peggy Williams on the project to revitalize the former Red Unit railroad coach at the Showpeople's Winterquarters, and Father Jerry Hogan's presentation on the history of the "Circus Ministry,"

an outreach program which provides spiritual guidance and support to those associated with the circus and outdoor entertainment.

Others who presented lectures and research papers included Neil Cockerline who provided valuable insight on how collectors should plan for the future of their collections, along with Kathleen Maher who provided revealing information on a scientific process that provided groundbreaking

discoveries related to a mummy at the P. T. Barnum Museum in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and Amelia Klem Osterud who detailed the life of one of Barnum's early attractions and one of the first tattooed men to be exhibited, Captain George Costentenus.

The passing of legendary sideshow owner and CHS member Ward Hall was acknowledged by Fred D. Pfening III and Dwight Currie, who spoke of his career and played a video of an excerpt by the classical quartet Ethel, who composed a special piece of music commemorating the contributions of Ward Hall to circus and carnival history.

Thursday's program also included Dale Williams' presentation on the role that his friend David "Deacon" Blanch-

Right, Pete Shrake reported on the poster exhibit that has just opened at Circus World Museum, and he talked about rediscovered treasures in the Baraboo collections.

Julie Parkinson photo



Above, left to right: Bandwagon Contributing Editors Fred Dahlinger and Chris Berry; CHS President, Don Covington; Tibbals Curator of Circus at The Ringling, Jennnifer Lemmer Posey; Kathleen Maher of the Barnum Museum; and Bandwagon Editor, Greg Parkinson.

Julie Parkinson photo

field played with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, along with Javier Luis Hurtado's research on the roles played by Latinos in the American circus and Betsy Kellem's study of the "first fan convention" when P. T. Barnum spoke to a group of young followers at a gathering in New York. The agenda also included a presentation by Feld Entertainment

Left, Barnum Museum Executive Director Kathleen Maher visited with Circus World Museum's Pete Shrake and Jennifer Cronk at the Tibbals Learning Center on Thursday evening.

Greg Parkinson photo



executive Bill Powell on the future of Sarasota's "Ring of Fame," a visible recognition of the area's rich circus history located in the popular St. Armand's Circle restaurant and shopping district.

Peter Shrake then spoke of some of the treasures recently rediscovered at Baraboo's Circus World Museum, followed by Steven Shelton's research on the true identity of circus-owner Charles Sparks. The formal presentations ended for the day with performer Rebecca Ostroff recounting her days with several circuses, including her years with Kelly-Miller during the time it was owned by both David Rawls and John Ringling North II.

After an evening where conventioners toured The Ringling and were hosted in the Tibbals Learning Center archives by Jennifer Lemmer Posey, Friday morning's schedule began with Dr. Gérard and Dr. Jeanne-Yvonne Borg who presented a paper on early Japanese circus history while projecting superb images of richly colored Japanese circus prints from their collection.

Other presentations on Friday included Maureen Brunsdale of Illinois State University who provided insight into some of the hidden treasures at the Milner Library. In



CHS members were able to visit Big Cat Habitat & Gulf Coast Sanctuary on Friday afternoon. This magnificent lynx is but one of scores of wild animals cared for at the Sarasota facility.
Julie Parkinson photo



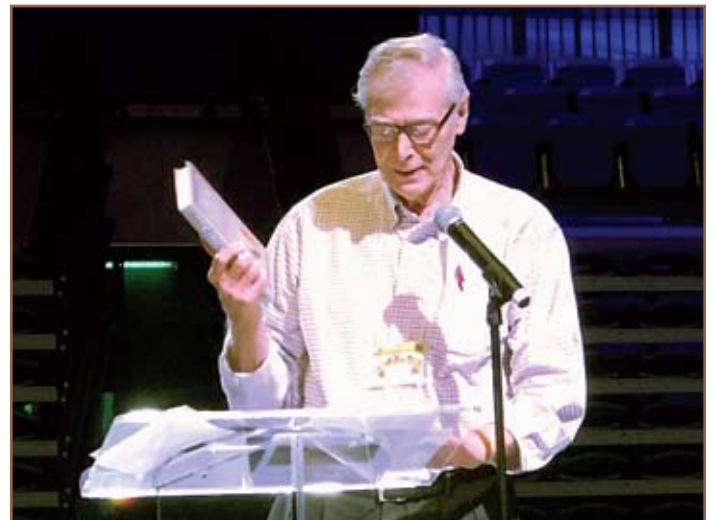
Gérard and Jeanne-Yvonne Borg of France posed for this photo with Jeanette Williams who came to America from Germany in late 1968 to join Ringling's new Red Unit.

Julie Parkinson photo

addition, some of the rare gems from the from The Ringling's circus collection were shown by Jennifer Lemmer-Posey and Heidi Connor.

The Friday schedule included William Hansard's paper on circus routes and why certain shows succeeded or failed, along with Kristin Lee's analysis of American circus routes during the season of 1914.

Greg Parkinson spoke to the group on what members can expect in upcoming issues of Bandwagon, while Lee Ketchum detailed future plans for the organization's website.



Niles "Buddy" Calhoun announced the winner of the Stuart Thayer Prize at the Friday night banquet at Circus Arts Conservatory.
Julie Parkinson photo



Superstar circus aerialists Dolly Jacobs and La Norma Fox are royalty of the Sarasota circus community. They appeared together at the CHS banquet hosted by Dolly and her husband Pedro Reis at Circus Arts Conservatory.

Greg Parkinson photo

the late John Herriott. The evening was capped with the presentation of the Stuart Thayer Prize for circus research, presented to Micah Childress for his book, *Circus Life: Performing and Laboring Under America's Big Top Shows*.

After a record-breaking auction of circus memorabilia on Saturday, many of those attending the convention spent the evening as guests of Showfolks for the club's monthly dinner before traveling to Kissimmee on Sunday where they attended a performance of the Royal Hanneford Circus, the final event of the jam-packed week.

Nearly 100 members of the Circus Historical Society participated in the 2019 convention which celebrated circus history of the past, present and future, a program that could not have been possible without the logistical support of Pete Adams and Debbie Walk. Together they created a setting that fostered both scholarship and fellowship by anticipating the many details involved with producing an event of this magnitude, and quickly solving any issues before they became a problem.

Planning is already underway for next year's convention, and an announcement will soon be made about the local and dates. Stay tuned for details on the 2020 convention, and we'll see you down the road! **BW**



Many CHS members took in a performance of the Royal Hanneford Circus on Sunday afternoon in Kissimmee. This photo captured the exchange during the Flying Poemas double passing leap.

James Cole photo

